Tristan & Isolde

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A Tragedy

Louis K. Anspacher

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Gift of the author

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MAIN

To My Mother and To Altera

Foreword

THE author wishes to make acknowledgment of his gratitude to Mr. George Edward Woodberry, whose patient and stimulating criticism has been a source of inspiration to him in his work.

LOUIS KAUFMAN ANSPACHER.

New York, 1904

Poesy

THE poet's soul is an Æolian lyre,
On which far wandering airs can softly stray,
Waking the tones that slumber to a lay
That stirs the embrous heart to rapturous fire.
The west wind, rising from the sunset pyre
Where flame the dolours of the dying day,
Sweeps threnodies that weep, yet fondly say
The dawn will burst again in carol choir,
That augurs day will come. So, Poesy,
To thee I turn when mourns my evening wind;
Thou art my solace, pledge and prophecy.
I turn to thee distressed and unresigned,
In sunset anguish for the joys that flee;
Thou art the glamour that is left behind.

Dramatis Personæ

MARK, King of Cornwall.

TRISTAN OF LYONESSE, Nephew of King Mark, and Knight of the Table Round.

MELOT, LIONEL } Cornish lords.

RUAL, Tristan's retainer.

ÆNGUS, CATHBAD, GERVAINE } Yeomen and hunters.

ARTHUR, a youth of the Court.

JEAN.

SERVANT.

ISOLDE, daughter of Gormun, King of Ireland, and wife of Mark, King of Cornwall.

BRANGÆNA, a lady of the Irish Court, companion of Isolde.

ISABEL, Lady in waiting to Isolde.

SERVANTS, ATTENDANTS, HUNTERS, ETC.

TIME: Late summer, 7th Century, A. D

PLACE: King Mark's Castle Tintagel in Cornwall, and later Lionel's castle on the coast.

Act I

A HALL in Castle Tintagel. In the rear centre is a large, heavy round-arch portal, on each side of which are heavy mullioned windows, all opening on a terrace. To the right can be seen the border of a heavy forest, dark with massive trees and the falling gloom of twilight. To the left, through the portal, the rear wing of the castle, with its high tower and ivy-covered sides, is visible.

In the interior of the hall, high above the portal, near the arched and groined ceiling, there are three small round-arch windows, set with purple-stained glass. There are entrances right and left to the hall. Between the right door and the front of the stage, is a generous hearth-place, covered with a high overhanging hood. Against the left wall is a low oaken settle. Bows, arrows, spears and nets are lying about.

Act I

Late Afternoon

The curtain discovers hunters, Gervaine, Cathbad, Ængus, Jean, and others, arranging spears, bows and trappings, preparatory to the chase.

CATHBAD

The afternoon grows late.

ÆNGUS

'Tis evening soon:
Our markmanship will have its trial now.
This spear has kissed the blood of many a boar;
I sharpened it anew.

CATHBAD

'Tis rusty with use;
Mine has the better head.

ÆNGUS

Rusty but trusty,
And tried in use. I'd rather have the shaft
Seasoned with service, the bow that has been bent.

All the hunters match spears and trappings. Enter Arthur, running through the gate from the right.

ARTHUR

Gervaine, Cathbad, saw ye my hound pass here?
He broke the leash on entering the gate.

GERVAINE

He passed within; we thought he followed you.

Exit Arthur across stage to the left.

CATHBAD

A fine lad that.

ÆNGUS

His father was a hunter;
He runs as if he had been born to chase.

CATHBAD

Too slender in the thigh.

GERVAINE

Where's the king's bow?

JEAN

Here, fresh suppled, oiled and strung.

GERVAINE

Takes the bow.

It has grown stubborn with its long disuse.

Bends it.

Are all the spears new polished for the chase?

JEAN

They are.

More hunters enter and converse to the rear of stage. Enter Arthur from the left, dragged in by the hound.

ARTHUR

I found him at the warder's post; he stood
Awaiting bits; but then I brought him here.
A hungry hound is keener on the scent:
And so I dragged him off.

ÆNGUS

You dragged him off!
It seems to me you follow where he leads.

Gervaine, going to the gate to the right.

GERVAINE

The day is fainting into evening's arms,

And dies as mildly as the agèd sleep.
The night will be too beautiful to hunt,
Besides a little bright and clear for us;
For million stars will shudder pityingly.
We that mean death should choose a darker night.

CATHBAD

The moon herself has strung her silver bow,
And means to hunt as well as we. So come,
Be not so tedious; Diana once
Did hunt the stag through fabled Grecian nights:
Now she entices hearts by her chaste light,
And slays them two by two. Her shaft is keen,
And kills by very beauty.

ÆNGUS

Many a maid
Hath had her honour slain by such a shaft.
What would our lovers do without the moon,
The stars and twilight,—yea and everything
That makes the day wink to avoid the sight?

CATHBAD

I would there were a truce to lovers' trysts,
Just for this evening; let it then be dark.
Those that are far in suits will bless the dark;
Those that begin will chafe expectantly,
And grow united close in separation;
Because they suffer absence each from each.

GERVAINE

How well he knows the trail!

CATHBAD

A wounded hart
Is easily tracked. I never yet have said:
"The day is fainting into evening's arms,"
"The night will be too beautiful to hunt."

Thou'rt grown too soft, and I can guess the cause.
We know, eh, fellows all, we know. I'll wager
My best knife that even now he carries
Some treasured tress bound closely to his breast.
Ah, you remember, Jean, we saw him slink
About the lodge at twilight yesterday,
Plucking the flowers for—which is it now?
And sighing at the moon as just before.

GERVAINE

Hush thy babbling prattle, fool, leave off!
Thou hast affection for thy horse and dog;
And this redeems thy callous pig-skin heart.
And yet if there should come some burning arrow,
Able to pierce thy hide, thou'dst heat thy breath
With vows of love, like a house a-fire.

ÆNGUS

The moon will shine in spite of all your words;
And guide the beast away from the outspread nets,
Which darkness might have hid. If ye can cloud
The sky as darkly as your brows with words,
Go on: if not, break off. The clash of breath
Makes melée in my ears. I would ye had
A decent cause for quarrel. 'Twould be sport
To see ye both, that both so much denied,
Be swords apoint in jealousy. If blood
Will willingly be spilt for woman's love,
Then wrestle for a man's, to end the spite;
And I myself shall umpire in the bout.
He that can throw the other most of five,
I'll then proclaim the better man of arms,
Or love, or whate'er title ye may wish.

GERVAINE

Agreed; I'll throw him.

CATHBAD

I'm willing to be thrown,
If thou art man enough to lay me flat.

GERVAINE

Aside.

Now, Isabel, it is for thee I fight;
So thoughts of thee be near to gird my strength.

Abstractedly takes a miniature from his breast and kisses it.

CATHBAD

Where got you that, sir? Did you steal from me?

He opens his own bosom, and reveals an identical miniature. The hunters laugh uproariously; but Gervaine and Cathbad are in great mortification and confusion.

ÆNGUS

The pot has called the kettle black ere this.

GERVAINE

Aside. Going to the left of stage.

I would not injure him; he'd stay at home
With Isabel to nurse him, while I hunted;
And yet I would not have him win of me
For the honour of my love.

CATHBAD

Aside. Going to the right of stage.

I would not injure him; her pity then
Would make up more than admiration lost;
And, winning, I should lose. What shall I do?
I would not fail, yet would not beat him thus.

ÆNGUS

So ho! ye both do tread each other's heels.
'Twill be a jolly match, and Isabel—

Is that her name?—the queen of tournament,
Will be the prize. I had not thought that this
Had made ye nettles for a mutual rose.
I'll have her by my side to watch the sport.
Who's Isabel?

JEAN

She is Isolde's maid.

ÆNGUS

So, combatants, ye're ready now, I trust.

GERVAINE

It is too late, the hunt starts even now;
And 'twould fatigue us; let us meet to-morrow.

JEAN

Aside, to Ængus.

It is too late to-day.

ÆNGUS

Aside, to Jean.

I know it is;
But leave me to my sport.

Aloud.

The time hangs heavily before we start;
And if ye do not now, upon the word,
Fall to; I shall proclaim ye both for cowards,
Take Isabel unto myself, and leave
Ye both to gape.

Gervaine and Cathbad fall to.
Enter Lionel.

LIONEL

Peace, fellows, break ye off!

They cease.

Your noise grows riotous within these halls.
'Tis unbecoming; meet beyond the lodge.

And see, here comes Lord Melot, ready for the chase:
He's lingering on the terrace's approach.

Aside.

He always comes so pat upon the time,
As if he had some calendar of prophecy.

ÆNGUS

I like him not; too much the hypocrite,
That snake-like sloughs, each day, another face,
And takes a new one for each new event.

LIONEL

He seems a choking weed about the king,
And yet his services are large. Men can,
With selfishness at heart, oft do a deed
That will redound in benefits to all;
But yet be selfish when the end's disclosed.
He seems most loyal to the noble king,
And wields, e'en now, the strong right arm of power.
Were heart and service both conjoined in him,
He would be past reproach.

Enter Melot.

MELOT

Good even, all.
Is everything prepared? We start at night.

GERVAINE

It is, Sir Melot; readiness awaits
The king's command.

LIONEL

Perchance some exercise
Will lift the cloud of sadness from his face,
And let it beam as bright as it was wont.

MELOT

Why? Is the king depressed? I saw it not;
And I have been a neighbour to his heart
These many months.

ÆNGUS

Aside.

No doubt, that is the cause.

GERVAINE

I know no reason, sir, but yet it seems
Some melancholy broods upon his brow.
I that have known him since I was a boy,
Have never seen his visage so unhappy.

MELOT

The king is past his youth; he is not sad.
Pray, would you have the middle-agèd man
As blithe and supple as the younker there,
Who would outspeed his hound?

LIONEL

It seemed he drooped
When Tristan went away to Bretigny.
He lives as if he were but half himself
Since Tristan left; and he has had no news;
No rumour of Sir Tristan's knightly deeds
Has come to rouse his pride.

MELOT

Think you 'tis Tristan that the king now mourns
As if in death?

LIONEL

I do.

GERVAINE

So do we all.

ARTHUR

With the hound.

Sir Lionel, I've heard of Tristan's name;
My mother used it as a prayer for me,
That I should grow into a man, and be
Most like him.

LIONEL

'Twould be well, my lad, for thee
To imitate such knighthood, if thou couldst.
He was a pattern knight, so noble, gentle,
And withal so strong. I can remember,
Some three years back, about this time of day,
When flowers yield most fragrance ere they close,
Upon the road that leads within the wood,
He slew grim Morolt.

ARTHUR

Who was Morolt, sir?

LIONEL

Isolde's uncle, and brother to the king,
The warlike Gormun, king of Ireland.

ARTHUR

Why slew he him?

LIONEL

He came for tribute, lad.
This land of ours had groaned beneath the tax
Of yearly stipend unto Ireland;
And Morolt, haughty in his dominance,
Came with his insolent demand again.
Then Tristan said to Mark: "My liege, let me,
Who am of Cornwall now, and of thy blood,
Relieve this land of bondage and the tax."
Not waiting for refusal then he rode
Upon the giant Morolt and his troop.

We heard his thunderous cry: "Hear ye," he said,
"We shall no longer pay ye fealty, sir,
Nor any tribute." Dark the giant frowned
Upon the youth, and then a disdainful smile
Curled up his beard, and Tristan set his spear
And cried: "I am the tribute, sir. If thou
Be bold enough to take me, here I am
To meet thy capture." And they met in fight.
They crashed like frowning clouds in a thunder shock;
And splintering lightnings shivered on their spears.
But Tristan hurled big Morolt o'er his croup;
Then leaped he to the ground, as light as falls
The windless leaf of autumn to its grave.
Morolt arose, with curses on his lips,
Drawing his sword, he lashed at Tristan's helm;
And Tristan hewed the hulky giant down
Upon the second blow. The Irish left,
And since that time have never come again;
For we are now in peace and wedlock joined.
But Tristan found he had been wounded deep
In the encounter, with a poisoned sword.
He drooped since then, although, 'twas said, Isolde
Cured him of the wound.

ARTHUR

Was't honourable
For one to fight with poison on his sword?

LIONEL

No, my lad; that was the reason why
Isolde undertook to cure the wound;
E'en though 'twas done upon her enemy.
But, since that time, Sir Tristan always failed,
As if he had been spelled by magic art.
He came to Cornwall, whole in body, but,
I fear, not whole in spirit. He would once

Outride the boldest in the hunt or lists;
But, since that time, he never rode again.

ARTHUR

Where is he now?

LIONEL

Alas,we do not know;
Some say in Bretigny, or else in France;
But nothing certain.

GERVAINE

Look, men, the shadows' ears are pointed thin;
They slant now timorous from their lairs to peep
And hear if day be gone. Come, fellows, hasten
To see the horses and the hounds, if they
Be ready for the chase. Come, all;
We'll have our bout to-morrow, before noon.

Exeunt all but Melot.

MELOT

So Tristan 'tis, as these would have me think,
Has caused the whole of this abstraction.
I dare believe the root lies deeper yet
Of that dark gloom that grows to shade his face.
'Tis not dug up with guessing: "Tristan's gone."
Tristan, while here, outstarred me; now, away,
He seems to have grown brighter, as a comet,
Quenched in the dark, still beams in memory.
He sits so surely in the king's regard,
Since he has gone, that mention of his name,
Without his praise, or hope of soon return,
Draws from the king a mild look of reproach,
That turns all envy to confusion.
He shines, anointed in the king's esteem,
And my sharp calumnies glide off from him,
Like drops from off a swan. Besides, the king,

Weak from very magnanimity,
Will not believe; and looks upon my hints
With mute command of silence in his pain.
No flash of anger, as at first:—ah, true!
If Mark felt no forebodings of the truth;
Nor that my hints came but halfway to meet
With his suspicions coming the other half,
He would continue still in his rebuke.
He answers not; this argues half belief.
They both are noble, Tristan and the king;
My guilt ought hush me. Cease, and man thyself.
Ye scruples are the infants of my fear,
Which I will strangle at your very birth.
I'll think no more of it. To have him win,
Where I have failed; to plant his growing tree
Upon the soil, made rich with my defeat!
No, no. Why stays he not in Bretigny?
What does he here, stepped in as Mark's successor,
A mushroom that has sprung up over night?
And Tristan is no nobler than myself;
Yet still he grows in honour. He has done
More deftly what I 'tempted oft to do;
I rest now, as it is in Mark's disfavour;
And fall to lower ebb in his regard.
I must strike upward now, or fail in all.

Enter Rual, stealthily, through further door at the right. He does not see Melot; but Melot, standing in the shadow of the gate, sees him.

MELOT

'Tis Rual by his gait; but why so close?
I'll hide me here to listen what is toward.
I have a premonition of some news,
To feed the king's suspicion and my cause.

Rual knocks gently for the servant, but starts back at his own noise.

RUAL

Did ever knocker make such noise as this?
'Twould rouse the dead. No answer,—then again.

Knocks, but door opens. Rual, startled, quickly recovers as servant appears.

RUAL

Yes, yes, 'tis Rual; gape not, but be quick;
For I am still unseen, and would be off
Before an eye can find me. Where's Brangæna?

SERVANT

She was with the queen, when I last saw her. They cannot have ventured far from here, for the queen has not been well of late, nor joyous; and, if one could trust what here is whispered by the gossiping maids about her majesty,—

RUAL

Enough!
See that thou find Brangæna. Swallow thy words;
Go thou to seek her, I would speak with her,
With no one near; so haste. Here is a purse
To gag thy tongue withal.

Puts purse into servant's mouth.

SERVANT

I shall call her hither; but, since purchase breeds advice, it were safelier to come within; for all prepare here for a hunt, and meet together, within the hour to start. I shall find the lady, and bring her to you. Come within.

RUAL

I fear a woman's room more than a tent,
Where warriors slumber on their hostile arms.

Exit within.

MELOT

Surmise will prophesy that Tristan comes!
I'll venture all my favour with the king
Upon this stake, and win beyond my hopes;
Or else lose all. The king has not looked kindly
Here of late upon my services;
And this will win or lose, for now I stand
Unsteadily. And Tristan comes again;
Isolde will receive him once again;
I'll to the king. My star is on the rise;
My plan is yet in ferment. I'll to the king.

Melot goes toward left, as king enters from the right.

KING

Where goest thou, Melot?

MELOT

Well met, my liege; the men
Are all prepared, and wait for night to fall
And your command to ride off on the chase;
For everything is tip-toed for the start.

KING

My heart is not forth on the hunt to-night;
Some brooding heaviness oppresses me.
The evening seems too beautiful for blood,
Too much of mocking peace, except within.
My heart is knocking secrets in my breast,
Which I cannot interpret to my sense.
Some unnamed sadness, yet too deep for words,
Has settled with the evening on the earth;
And darkens all my thoughts from scrutiny:
But yet I feel that all is not aright.

MELOT

My liege, 'twill do thee good to ride; 'twill rouse
Thine all too flagging spirits. Thou broodest much.

KING

Thy hints would have me brood the more; if that
I listened with belief to what they pointed.

MELOT

My former duties to your majesty
Will plead with many prayers 'gainst thy distrust.

KING

Be not so dutiful: so then, in turn,
'Twill not be so incumbent on my thanks
To listen to thy speech.

MELOT

Wouldst thou prefer
That I should fawn on thee, like some I know;
And seek to rise in thy esteem by smiles,
Hiding the malice, as a gloss upon it?

KING

The truth is sometimes hard to hear, I know;
But does it follow then, my lord, from this,
That everything that hurts, perforce, is truth?

MELOT

Nay, do not misbelieve me, liege, for 'tis
As I have often said—hark, list to me;
Now I shall speak more openly my mind.
And wouldst thou have surcease of all thy fears,
Hear and attest the truth of what I say:
Tristan is secret come to Cornwall; sends
His missives to thy lady queen by Rual,
Whom I saw now, e'en with my eyes, slink in.

KING

Thou liest, knave! Were Tristan landed here,
He would have sent announcement on ahead,
To make expectancy a pleasure, ere he came.

MELOT

Hast thou heard aught of Tristan these long months;
Why should he wake the ear of Rumour now?
Ah, true, I had forgot; perhaps he wed,
As Rumour says, Iseult of Bretigny.
But Rumour's parents never lived in wedlock;
And she is a bastard, so we'll have no faith
In what she says of other marriages:
Her parentage is illegitimate.
Perhaps he fathered that report himself
To better win thy over-credulous ear,
To indicate his love was elsewhere found.
But be not gulled by that transparent lie;
Thinking his love is elsewhere but in Cornwall.

KING

Art thou so pure of vicious taint, thyself,
That thus art bold to slander all I love?
Art thou so proof and steadfast in thy virtue,
That thou so surely canst condemn another?
Men usually condemn that vice the most
Which they half fear themselves are subject to;
And so buttress themselves in others' praise,
Which always hesitates to join the man
With what he says is most detestable.
Complete thy virtues with some smack of mercy;
They savour else too much of Stoic pride;
Lacking th' ennobling touch of sympathy
With what has fallen low.

MELOT

Aside.

My Rubicon is crossed; I dare not fail.

Aloud.

It is as I have said, my liege.

KING

Melot,
Thou sayest that Rual is already come,
And has not craved our presence?

MELOT

Yes, my liege;
And further secretly besought Brangæna
For his lord.

KING

Darest thou avouch this, man,
And put against it, in the balance, all
Thy hopes of life and honour in this world,
And grace hereafter in the next?

MELOT

I do.

KING

Call Rual and the servants forth. I'll see.
I hope that I can prove thee false.

MELOT

My liege,
Pray do not so; yield to my plan to-night.
And, if I fail to prove thee what I say,
If thou thyself add not thy seal thereto,
There is a long time left for chastisement.

KING

Thou venturest well; what wouldst thou have me do?

MELOT

Go forth upon the hunt, and lead them on;
And then let us return before the rest,
And take an unexpected game within our nets.
Tristan will come—

KING

Enough, no more, I pray.
How eager for my sanctity thou art!
I would not bring her to the trial, Melot.
Were it not that thou hast ventured all upon
The sureness of thy prophecy to-night,
I could not listen. I never heard thee speak
Too well of any one; but marvel yet
Thy bravery and daring in dispraise.
Go, get thee hence, and call Brangæna here;
I will not join thee on the hunt before
I've looked upon my queen. I'll see thee anon.

MELOT

Aside.

I too have prayed Isolde for her love;
I too have stormed the castle of her heart
With flaming firebrands shot at her breast.
Isolde dare not broach my suit to her;
She knows I know of Tristan; and her honour
Will never stand the shock of two assaults.
Proving her false in this, 'twill force discredit
On her truthfulness in all.

KING

Why stayest thou here?

MELOT

I wait upon thy further pleasure, liege.

KING

Thou hast served me with great pains; now call Brangæna.

Exit Melot.

My fears are armour for his calumnies.
I cannot easily believe her false;

And, Tristan, no, it is incredible;—
All knighthood falls in thy disloyalty.

Enter Brangæna, much excited at first.

KING

Aside. Turning from Brangæna.

I cannot speak to her; I shame myself
In thus mistrusting,—faugh,—and if there be some guilt,
She too would shield it.

Openly and calmly.

Go thou, Brangæna, tell thy queen Isolde
I rest within my chamber, ere I leave
To hunt all night. I did not sup with her,
And would bespeak her—go.

BRANGÆNA

I shall, my liege.

Aside.

So close upon the footsteps of discovery,
And yet so ignorant of any wrong.

Exit.

KING

If she deny herself to me tonight,
I shall misjudge no longer, but discover
The questionable core of truth, deep hid
In the semblable exterior of deceit.
I hang all limp upon a rack of doubt;
And each dry leering glance can pierce and wound me.
Oh God, I am full loth to go; but yet
I must once see her face to face, to scan
If any shame lie hidden in her heart,
If summer lust lie under this cold snow,
Before I slander both our royal selves

In yielding to these infamous suggestions—
When truth is got so easy, as it seems.
The golden glory of a monarch's love
Ought not so readily be misted, spoiled
And tarnished by mere breath of hate and guile.
Can she be both so lovely and so false?
I'll pluck the heart of truth from out despair,
And live or die.

Exit.

Enter Gervaine hastily, knocking for the servant. Reads letter.

GERVAINE

Thou must be true to me, my Isabel;
I shall not think thee faithless, though were all
The courtiers in the kingdom, far and wide,
Gemmed with thy miniature, as with a cross,
To hang upon the breast; thy face a charm,
To invite the mildest powers to intercede
For their salvation. Love, I shall return
Upon the morrow morn; be well till then.
Let me possess thy thoughts, as thou dost mine.

Enter servant.

Take thou this to mistress Isabel,
And take this fee for silence and for haste;
I must be off.

Exit Gervaine.

SERVANT

I go. I go. 'Tis a good business. A summary messenger with variable goodly and golden fees, according to the wealth of the sender. So speed me well. I ought to frame a petition of license to the king;—but that craves further thought. Ah,—but then, 'tis secret, and the matter has no tongue; why should there then be ears?

Exit.

Enter Cathbad by another door, stealthily, and in haste. He knocks on servant's door, and reads letter aloud.

CATHBAD

I would that I could steal thee, Isabel,
As I have stolen thy miniature. Forgive,
If one will tell of my dear loving theft.
'Twas love that stole, for thou'st stolen my heart;
And 'twas a fair reprise; forgive me, fair,
If I have dared to love and hoped to win.
Disdain not all my love; each smallest part
Were then enough t' excuse my suit to thee.

Enter servant. Seeing Cathbad with letter.

SERVANT

Aside.

Upon my word, another missive full of vows and blood. Is all the world in love? Is Venus (who, I have heard, is lit with lover's eyes)—is Venus in the ascendant; and am I made a Mercury general to the males?

CATHBAD

Thou knowest the lady Isabel; take this
Upon the silent wings of haste to her;
And let this fledge thy wings and clog thy tongue.

Gives him purse.

SERVANT

No more missives from Peter to the scullery. I serve now only the nobility. Business is heavy, and I shall soon keep a clerk.

CATHBAD

What sayest thou, fool? Haste and dispatch.

SERVANT

Yes, yes, I go.

Exit.

Bugle sounded for the hunt to gather.

CATHBAD

They muster now anon.

Hunters fill the stage with hounds and implements of the chase.

Enter among others Melot, Cathbad, Gervaine, Ængus, and Arthur. Melot stands anxiously in the background, looking for the king.

HUNTERS IN CHORUS

The saddled steeds in the mews are stamping;
The coistril asses bray.
There is music of chains and of bits loud champing;
And rattle of armour and buckles aclamping,
Amid the shrilly neigh
Of blooded coursers, that scorn the ground,
With a toss of the mane and a springing bound.

MELOT

Where is the king?

GERVAINE

We wait for him.

MELOT

Perhaps he will not come; he seemed in doubt.

CHORUS

The armour is standing, all bright in the hall,
Bows and arrows and spears.
The leader is ready, awaiting the call;
The huntsmen are eager for night to fall;
Too slow the daylight wears
A laggard pace through the waning sky;
Were the day a hound, 'twould quicklier fly.

Curtain descends on this tableau.

Act II

THE balcony of Isolde's room in the wing of Castle Tintagel. To the left rear is the large turret seen in Act I, from which wide circular steps lead down to the stage. To the right rear is the deep, dark forest. The left foreground has a large round-arched portico and entrance to the castle. The right foreground has a low marble seat, draped with dark purple cloth. There is a balustrade extending around the rear of the balcony; and in the right rear there is a flight of broad steps descending from the stage to the level of the forest below. There is no light save the warm, soft light of the evening, and the mild effluence of the crescent moon above the turret.

Act II

Early Evening

As curtain rises, Isolde is discovered in her balcony, listening to the hunting song below.

CHORUS OF HUNTERS.

In a trice we are off, and our steeds shall wind us
Through caverns of the night;
Swifter than light, for the sparks rain behind us;
We shall pass and return, ere the slow dawn can find us:
Yea, swifter than the light.
Our coursers pant fire; it flames in the eye,
It flares in the nostril; they burn as they fly.

Curtain entirely raised.

Some huntsmen abroad are outspreading the mesh
Of the finely woven snare.
The hounds are straining with might at the leash,
With nostrils astart for the smell of flesh;
They sniff for a taint in the air.
At a leap with each pulse they will skim away;
Afar, in the distance, resounds their bay.

ISOLDE

The evening seems a winter dream of spring,
So mild and soft, so mystic and unreal,
Ephemeral as childhood's memory,
When peeping through the vacancy of age.
The air is full of strange enchantments now,
Filling the senses numb with soft delight.
Now were a time most fitly sought to die;

Half dreaming melt into the elements,
When they seem most alive and beautiful:
To fade into the purple of the west.

Enter Brangæna with Isabel.

BRANGÆNA

Isolde, Isolde,—

ISOLDE

'Tis thou, Brangæna.

BRANGÆNA

Yes, with greetings from the king,
Thy liege and husband Mark.

ISOLDE

Aside.

My liege and husband.

BRANGÆNA

Sends thus his pleasure to his loving queen.

ISOLDE

Aside.

His loving queen.

BRANGÆNA

He rests in armour, waiting for the hunt,
Which starts at fall of night; and bids thee come.
He lacked thy presence at the evening meal;
And will be gone till dawn.

ISOLDE

Brangæna, stay.
I shall send Isabel—

To Isabel.

Go thou, and say
Unto my lord the king, I am not well:
Tell him I have retired to my room.

BRANGÆNA

He can but spend a moment with thee; go,
I pray thee, dear, and use him not so hard.

ISOLDE

To Isabel.

Thou hast my answer; bring it to the king.

Exit Isabel.

Brangæna, come thou close; my heart is full
Of strange forebodings and of portents wild.

BRANGÆNA

Bad dreams are said to augur opposites,
And bring us joys in weeds of sorrow draped.
I almost fear to tell my other charge.

ISOLDE

What is it?

BRANGÆNA

Isolde, one more hasty message,
Breathed in a secret ear from one thou lovest.

ISOLDE

Tristan!

BRANGÆNA

Yes, his avant courier waits,
And bides thine answer.

ISOLDE

Haste thee, speak.

BRANGÆNA

He brings his master's greeting from anear;
And begs thee grant an audience for to-night.
Sir Tristan lingers hidden in the wood,
To hear thy word.

ISOLDE

Is Tristan well? Much changed?
Ah, tell me, sweet, how looks that knightly front?

BRANGÆNA

Isolde, hark, I have not seen thy love;
Only his courier bides at the postern gate:
Sir Tristan is not come; and Rual's horse
Paws restlessly, and curvets many rods
Under the outer barbacan, as if
The brute could also share anxiety.
They chafe to hear thy bidding, and the sign
To tell the joyous news Tristan may come
And feed his famished eyes upon thy face.

ISOLDE

I knew not why I could not bide the king;
Some prophecy had whispered in my heart
Its mute unworded oracle.

Hunters singing below:

CHORUS

The hounds are off, and the flying steeds lag,
As over the hills they go.
Our arrows will fly to the heart of the stag,
Caught wild in a leap from crag to crag,
But for the hounds too slow.
Our spears will pierce the frenzied boar;
And the mildest grasses will drink his gore.

Jubilant shouts below of "The king!" "Hail to the king!"

CHORUS

The echoes will rouse at the sound of our horn:
Tan tan tara tara ta lira—
'Twill shiver the night like the coming of morn;

From the hills to the valleys 'twill rocking be borne:
Tan tan tara tara ta lira—
Heigho for the hunter that quarries the beast!
A prize of the fell and first place at the feast.

Isolde goes to the balcony and looks out. Horns, stamping, etc.

ISOLDE

The king has gone upon the hunt. Oh haste,
Bid Rual speed and tell his master this:
Were Isolde in her death's last agony,
She yet would rise to find her life renewed
In his embrace. Bid his retainer haste.

BRANGÆNA

Isolde, pray do not receive him now.
When Mark had spoken, I did think all well;
But now, I would not have thee meet him.

ISOLDE

Peace!
Not risk as much for him as he for me?

BRANGÆNA

He knows not of the danger on his trail;
And Melot, when he called me to the king,
Looked gracious, more than was his wont.

ISOLDE

The more my risk, the greater sacrifice.

BRANGÆNA

To-morrow will be safer.

ISOLDE

Brangæna, haste.
If he dare come, shall I not dare receive him?
My happiness is hanging by a thread.

Brangæna, speed thy task, and bide within
With Isabel; nor come to tell me later
What thou hast said. I know that he will come.
I send thee thus with no alternative,
And will receive no answer;—go.

BRANGÆNA

The signal, lady, when he may approach?

ISOLDE

Ah, yes, almost forgot. My veil shall hang;
He knows the veil, 'twas treasured since he left.
'Twill hang from out the upper turret's mullion;
Where, long ago, it often hung before.
He knows the place, too, the same balcony
That overlooks the wood. Tell him when night,
With precious darkness blinds his eager sight,
I shall await him. Go, Brangæna, go;
And I myself shall hang this evening star;—
No other hands but these.

Exit Brangæna. Isolde goes above to the turret.

ISOLDE

It grows already dark. I think that night,
Always the friend of lovers, hears my prayer.

Looking out from above.

The cavalcade goes out the northern gate;
And Tristan's message is already passed.

Isolde chants.

SONG TO THE NIGHT

Come, night, and fold the world in thine embrace;
On the yielding breast of earth sink in repose.
Join waiting lovers at each trysting place;
And each dull sightless eye of daylight close.
Steal soft, but quickly.

The gloaming is the day grown sick with yearning
For his fond lover and eve's dewy bed:
Oh come, thou night, the heliotrope is turning,
And each earth flower hangs a weary head.
Steal soft, but quickly.

Each maiden lily weeps a tear of anguish,
A tear of hope and disappointment blent;
Come quickly, all the mournful earth doth languish.
Who, envious of our joy, doth hold thee pent?
Steal soft, but quickly.

The longing shadows stretch out toward the east;
The dark moon in its crescent's arm is clasped.
The dusky valley rolls in billowy mist:
Day should, ere this, his golden last have gasped.
Steal soft, but quickly.

Come, Tristan, let the querulous day not hold thee;
These arms will fold thee. Come, thou wanderer.
Let daylight linger; can thy love not bold thee
To dare a dying sun for sake of her,
Who bids thee quickly?

Fly, doves, and wake the owls to hasten evening;
Invite the nightingale to her complaint:
Perhaps the day's wan ghost is lingering
For mournful obsequies; but I am faint.
Come, night, yea quickly.

The horn of the hunter no longer wounds my ear;
Even the chattering echo is asleep.
Come, love, each wind doth murmur thou art near;
From bending heavens restless stars do peep.
Tristan,—Tristan.

How often, in my thought, I called thy name,
And always didst thou come; why stayest thou now?
However far thou wert, 'twas yet the same;
Thou camest at my bidding breathèd low.
Tristan,—Tristan.

I call thee now in voice; my lips would press
A burning kiss upon each syllable;
Yet com'st thou not. Dost fear thy happiness?
Tristan, 'tis eve, I hear the vesper knell

Vesper rings.

The day's death, Tristan.

Enter Tristan below, into the pale moonlight. Isolde sees him.

Oh, Tristan, come not with the knell, pray wait—
Oh come not, stay but one eternal trice;
Some premonition—

Tristan leaps up the turret steps. Isolde comes to meet him. They embrace.

TRISTAN

Love, Isolde, Fate,
For once, is kind: I've paid the exile's price
Of tears and hopes.

ISOLDE

I've borne thy kiss unsmirched upon my lips,
Inviolate, since thou hast left.

TRISTAN

'Twas long.
I've hungered often for this moment, love:
My soul seemed haggard, when removed from thee.

ISOLDE

As mine removed from thine. Ah, Tristan, love,
Thou art my sunlight; let me sheaf thee up
And garner thee within my arms.

TRISTAN

My bosom
Has been cold since thou hast left it bare.

ISOLDE

Fold me up within thine arms again,
To feel thy wandering breath upon my brow;
Let me be islanded in thine embrace;
And let the ocean of humanity
Reel and stagger in a waste beyond.

TRISTAN

Once more to have thee close to me, my love—
'Tis like a re-discovery of home:
A welling fountain in a desert plain,
When one had feared his hopes were a mirage.
Thou art no dream, my love?

ISOLDE

How pale thou art!

TRISTAN

I left my life behind me, when I went,
And now return to living powers again:
Once more I breathe the vital airs and live.

ISOLDE

Where hast thou wandered through these long sad months?

TRISTAN

Through lonely deserts, for thou wert not there.
The flowers had no beauty in my sight;
The harvests waved for everyone but me;

The early winds were odourless for me.
I lived but in the past, and in my hopes,
E'en though they perjured my resolves and thine.
Isolde, what deep vows we swore!
I have seen thee, love, now let me go.
My heaven is attained before my death;
And let us both think this a gracious dream,
Then vows and honour both would be intact.

ISOLDE

What spirit prompted us to take those vows?
My heart has never joined my hand in them;
Thou hadst not gone beyond the threshold, love,
Before I wished thee back again.

TRISTAN

Isolde,
More faithless was I to my vows than thou.
The further I withdrew from thee, the more
I languished for return. At every step,
A vow rebroken, and I wandered far.
How does my uncle Mark? What have I said!
Forgive me, God, for mention of his name.
How does my liege the king since I have gone?

ISOLDE

Quite well. Why hast thou not sent messages
These many months?

TRISTAN

I could not send to him:
He has become a barrier 'twixt our loves,
No longer mine own kin, yet innocent.
What do we here? We both are outcasts, love,
Shipwrecked in hope upon a desperate sea
Of throbbing wholesome life about us both.
I saw some holy men upon my road,

Some palmers, happy in their purgèd lives;
But I was all too happy in my sin
To understand their bliss, or envy them;
To be as blithe and innocent as they.
I wished for death; I longed and prayed for death;
I was in love with death, and tried to woo her soft;
But hopes of seeing thee brought life again,
And made me false to her. I never knew
That men could have such life in their despair.
My hopelessness gave courage still to live;
For I had reached the lowest ebb of all;
And any change, perforce, was betterment.
The winter set a tombstone on the earth;
Snow drifted in the hollows of my heart;
And yet I lived. And then the summer came.
No blossoms bloomed within my stony breast;
But sterile hope began to stir again.
Couldst thou not be far happier, were I dead?

ISOLDE

I've lived with Mark, because he was thy kin.
I tried to love him as I would have loved
Thy child, if thou hadst died before my time,
Leaving this remnant of thyself to me,
To cheer my widowhood. The attempt was sick
And failed, alas! Husband and child in one—
He took thy place,—I did not raise him to it.
How could it help but fail? Alas, it failed,
Because I always prayed that it would fail.
Why speak we of what was, or what will be?

TRISTAN

I've lived so long within the past, 'tis grown
The only language I can speak. The runes,
Glooming the infinite future, still are dumb
And unintelligible. Here we stand

Upon the keen point of a mountain peak,
Both sides abysses, past and those to come.
No higher satisfaction than a fear
Darkening the depths.

ISOLDE

Thou'rt come again;
King Mark is on the hunt; the night is ours.

TRISTAN

Ah, yes, we ought be happy, ought we not?
But happiness is yet an unknown tongue,
Too long forgotten to be reassumed
With all the fluency of constant use.
We'll speak about the past as if 'twere past.
We should be happy, ought we not, my love?
Come, let us speak again of what has happed,
As though 'twere buried, and could never rise
As a ghost to fright us with unreal fears.
We'll speak of what is gone, as 'twere a tale
Others have lived, and lived unhappily.

ISOLDE

How camest thou here, to Cornwall?

TRISTAN

Abstractedly.

Ah, time has brought again undreamèd joys;
And all is safe; my old retainer lurks
Within the shadow of the king's approach.
Oh, all the restless months I drave abroad,
Since last we parted, now seem swallowed up
In one abyss of painful memory—
A nightmare brooding o'er a bed of pain.
The past is joined again, and I awake,
As doth the year from winter sleep to spring.
It seems as if I never left thy lips;
Nor pressed the unwilling hand in last adieu.

ISOLDE

Speak not that knell again if thou dost love.
Nay, Tristan, there will be no more adieus;
For thou wilt never leave me, love, to die
Forsaken of thy love; nay, not to die,—
Far worse than death, to wander sinfully,
Like an unshriven ghost, through all the toil
Of desolate days and desert nights; to pine
Through leaden moments sluggish as the years
Of sunless æons at the midnight pole.

TRISTAN

With slight scorn.

Ah, love, mine was, perhaps, an easier lot:
Through France I wandered, flitted through Provence;
I shunned the garish day, and rode by night,
Or else, in maddened heat, I lost myself,
Vainly endeavouring to forget our love,
As we had promised at our last farewell.
I wandered thus, through dreary, dreary days;
At length my heart failed; I could go no more.
The tourney clarion sounded in my ears,
Yet waked no courage echo in my heart;
For I had lost my spirit and my name,
The honour I achieved on tented fields,
Won at the spear's point, in the enemy's midst,
In many feudal wars and many lands.

ISOLDE

Tristan, no more; was fate less harsh with me?
I lingered here alone; no deeds could help
To rouse my drooping spirit from its dusk.
The world seemed but one large and moveless shadow,
Stretched from o'erhanging barren, naked boughs
Over the winter's ice, opaque and chill.

I tried to summon hate to kill my love—
To no avail. In vain, I often mused:
'Twas thou that slew my kinsman on my soil,
Brave Morolt. Yet was all my fiery hate,
The frenzy of my malice, turned to love,
Intense, a pendular extreme swung full
To the utmost swing; for I must love thee, knight,
As once I hated thee, fervent and fierce:
No placid middle course betwixt extremes.

TRISTAN

Tell me, Isolde, I know thou lovest me;
Thou'lt answer me the truth, I know thou wilt.
This also could avail thy former hate
To help thee slay an outraged love.
A babbling rumour brought the jealous news
That Tristan, noble Tristan Lyonesse,
Had wed the fair Iseult of Bretigny.

ISOLDE

Ah, Tristan, say not so, deny it.
Rumour hath often fashioned lies before.
Why pause? Thine arms release me: speak,—
Oh speak the truth, the worst, the bitterest truth.
Speak, Tristan, thou dost know . . .
I, too, am wed.

TRISTAN

Isolde, listen till the end:
In many lands I wandered, anguish driven,
Until I came, at length, to Bretigny.
My old ancestral home in ruins lay;
But since its ruin imaged forth my heart,
I thought that there I haply could content
My few last days among its mossèd walls.
Iseult of Bretigny dwelt close near me.

She was a youthful love; I knew her long.
There was a magic in the very name;
And I betrothed myself to cure my grief,
To turn it to some positive pain of woe,
That I might then live down. I prayed that God
Would blot thy hovering image from my mind;
And aid me to regain what I had lost.
One lonely evening, in the calm, there came
A thought as wild as ever seared my brain:
"Thou dost not love this Iseult; canst thou bring
This innocent lamb, to quench a sinful flame
With chaste and trustful blood? Thou lov'st her not:
'Twere better one should die than both should live
A mockery on life and love." Then, too,
The desecration of thy love wrought so,
I could no further wander in my suit.
And so I broke it off, confessed my guilt;
Told her the motive of dishonoured vows.
Had she but scorned me, I could bear it well.
Ah no, Isolde, no such joy for me.
The drops of pity stood within those eyes,
Melting her pride. She took my hand in hers,
Released me to the world again, to thee;
Said she was proud to have occupied thy place;
And, like a mongrel cur, I slunk away
Whipped with her kindness.

ISOLDE

And then—

TRISTAN

And then I wandered with blind steps,
As listless and as wild as are the paths
The sorrowing wind makes through the waving grass
At sunset, when the world is bowed in grief.
Thou wert an unacknowledged beacon to my feet.

I wandered here, as to the very place
That I did once avoid; and when I saw
The dream-familiar haunts I knew so well,
I came to see thee once before my death,
To throw myself once more upon my knees
To beg thee—
Isolde, hear, there is one saintly gule
Beaming still white on my besmirched escutcheon:
My tears have washed that spot and kept it pure.
One bar of honour beams upon my shield;
I've never lost my love for thee; I've often tried.

ISOLDE

Didst thou not love Iseult of Bretigny?

TRISTAN

Isolde, hearken, love, when I was gored,
Struck to the earth by Morolt's poisonous sword,
It was Isolde healed me of that wound;
But, in the healing, thou didst then inflict
A deeper, subtler wound, deep to the heart.
Thou couldst not heal the gash thyself didst make.
I turned to Iseult for a second cure.
I bared my breast to her; she had no spell,
No soothing touch to balm away the burn.
Wouldst thou, Isolde, that I had been cured?

A long pause, then Tristan, startled.

What is that light, Isolde?

ISOLDE

Where, my love?

TRISTAN

Above.

ISOLDE

Oh, 'tis Brangæna in her tower room.

TRISTAN

Aside.

Love-making under shadows, once again;
All love-joy slain with the first beam of day
Impaled, perhaps, to be held up to shame.
A life of guilty blisses bred in the dark:—
Love-making, poisoned full of fears and conscience,
While 'tis a-making—A cursèd thing of sins
Too deep to be confessed.

ISOLDE

What ails thee, love?

TRISTAN

A still-born joy, all moribund at birth;
An aspen bliss, that quavers in the breath,
Spent in professing it—Oh God!

Rising.

ISOLDE

Thou wilt not leave me.

TRISTAN

No, not against thy will.
I would abide with thee eternally;
Share every breath with thee and die with thee,
To moulder with thee till our dust embraced;
And rise with thee to glory 'mid the stars.

ISOLDE

Oh, would that I had poisoned both of us;
Or that the shrieking spirits of the storm
Had never disobeyed my beck. I once
Could charm the winds and seas; command their strength,
As if they were my thralls. I summoned them
To gulf the hostile ship that bore us both.

Three long wild nights I called, and the sea heard,
Scourged like a brutish monster under the lash;
But still the arch spirit laughed upon the wave;
Shrilled through his frothy teeth, and hissed, "Isolde,
Thou too art now controlled; we would obey,
If thou wert free to give command. We serve
None other but *thy* will, none other, none."
And through the rigging shrieked the echo: "None."
I knew then that my hate was almost love.

TRISTAN

Then willingly would I have died with thee.
I felt no shame in that last wild embrace;
I thought that it had been our last; for life
Had terrors for me worse than death; and thou
Hadst once before pointed a sword at me.

ISOLDE

But that is past, and thou art here again.
I married Cornwall to be near to thee;
I never loved the king.

TRISTAN

My uncle Mark—
How long must I draw thus my breath in shame!
Oh God, the worm within the rose again
That seemed so damask fair; the beady eyes,
Blinking like sleeping serpents on the brim
Of my sweet cup of life. How long, how long,—
Perhaps we might have lived too happily,
Aspiring for a paradise on earth.

ISOLDE

Tristan, thou wert nearer when away from me.

TRISTAN

And I must go away again, Isolde.
I would not have thee seem dishonourable.

Shall tongues besmirch the name I love to hear,
Clothing our loves in shame?

ISOLDE

Sorrow and shame
Have bowed me to the yoke I have to bear.
Is it for this that I have prayed so long?

TRISTAN

My prayer would have thee better than thou knowest.
Pardon, my love, I would not hurt thy fears;
But the very strength of love I bear to thee
Seems brutal in its force and violence.
I could not willingly do hurt unto
The merest gossamer of thy fine-spun wish,
Trembling with rainbow hopes under the sun.
My love for thee would have thee pedestalled
Above the possible abuse of men.
Isolde, half my grief is grief for thee alone,
Unshared by any thoughts of my own pain.

ISOLDE

Tristan, thy name is sadness, yet I feel
I too through all this tearful time have earned
A privilege to share that name with thee:
Its spell has cast an ever-deepening shade
Upon my life, until it grew my own.

TRISTAN

The honey time of breathèd vows is past.
What shall we do? Love, thou must come with me.
We cannot linger thus; King Mark must know
I have thy whole heart; thou hast naught beyond
To give to him. We can no longer lie.
I would not hate my kinsman as my foe;
Stealing in honour's theft what fate gave me.
Isolde, speak, say thou wilt fly with me.

We take but what is ours; come, Isolde,
Thou must come; for I take but that which is
By thy confession all my own. Why wait?
Time serves us with occasion; let us fly
Quick as the time upon its aidant wing.

Isolde is silent for a moment.

Dost thou command me leave thee, love—thou'rt mute?

ISOLDE

Tristan, no, no. Nay, go not, go not now;
And yet my fears command thee not to stay.
I'll fly with thee, wherever thou wilt go;
I've always been with thee.

Calls.

Brangæna,—hist—

A noise.

Enter Rual, driving in Melot at sword's point.

RUAL

Die, thou spying, smelling, sneaking hound.
If I could make dispatch without my sword,
I would not smirch its honour in thy gore.

MELOT

Look to thyself, thou Pandarus.

RUAL

Beware!
Tristan, a spying dog!

TRISTAN

Put up thy sword.

Brangæna, coming down hastily from turret.

BRANGÆNA

Isolde, I saw the king approach the gate;
I could not so mistake so high a crest.

There seemed to lurk aside him one whose step
I am familiar with, seen in the dark o' nights.

ISOLDE

Brangæna, this is he. This is the cur,

Enter king behind, unnoticed by all.

The mongrel hound who licked and fawned me first,
With base and flattering tongue. I knew thee, knave.
Now, like the dog thou art, thou show'st thy fangs,
More like a snake that bites a scorning heel;
When honour treads a shame in its own dust.
Thou'rt waked again by envy to new life.
The falsehood *thou* didst act against thy king,
The treason to *thy* vowed allegiance,
Thou heap'st upon another's honoured head
To save thy own. Thou, his informer, Melot!
Who dared once offer me the secret love
That thou betrayest now, thy heat rebuked!
Oh, shame,—let one that has no guilt at heart
Be first to cast the stone.

TRISTAN

Drawing.

Thou miscreant dog,
Thy steel is drawn; defend thyself.

MELOT

I'll not cross swords with such as thou.

RUAL

Thou couldst do well to die by such a hand.
Nay, too much honour for a skulking wretch;
'Twould save thee from deserved oblivion.
To die by such an arm, 'twould be too much
For such as thou. Come, spend no breath in prayer;
Thou'lt need it all. If that thy coward legs,

Well trained to flee, had served not so well,
Thou wouldst e'en now be groaning out thy last,
Upon the highway where we met.

TRISTAN

Coward,
One of us two must die; so guard thyself.

They fight.

KING

Coming forward.

Tristan!

Tristan drops his sword, but Melot keeps on fighting. Rual interferes to guard his master, and disarms Melot; but Tristan has been wounded.

KING

Lay nothing more upon thy soul.

RUAL

To Melot.

Cullion and coward, to strike at one unarmed
And undefended!

Tristan staggers into Rual's arms.

KING

Peace! throw down your swords—

Then to Melot.

Yes, thou didst speak the truth; but yet from such
As thou I cannot hear it said. Thy tongue
Doth blacken candour when it utters it.
Thy treasonous heart puts on the mask of truth;
What canst thou say to answer this, I charge?

Brangæna and Isolde are with Tristan and Rual on right of stage.

BRANGÆNA

Aside.

Ah, go, good Rual, lead him off.
Bring him to Bretigny; all will be well.
Tristan, stay not; all will be well, I know:
There is as much of fate as fault in this.
I'll venture on the presence of the king,
And tell a secret to his majesty,
Too sad for condemnation. Go, pray go.
When he learns all, he must forgive us all;
Or else I'll share the lot of sin with you.
Oh, tarry not, but go immediately.
I know thy fate; I was its instrument.

KING

To Melot.

If thou canst clear thee of the very crime
Thou standest now accuser for, I'll hear;
Till then, be silent. Oft, ere Tristan left
Our kingdom, didst thou pour thy venom breath
In my unwilling ears; with words to hint
That Tristan shaped succession for my crown
By treasonous ways. I see thy soul
Ambitious to outstar by foulest means
The rising sun of Tristan soon eclipsed.
Envy, whetted on malice, forked thy tongue;
Calumniating others but to hide
Thy nude, defeated guilt in others' shame;
Building thyself in honour on the wrecks
Of those whose fame and honourable name
Thou levelest down. Melot, if, in three days,
Thou hast not cleared thyself of what I charge;
Or, if thy shame, last remnant of thine honour,
Banish thee not hence; I shall proclaim

Rewards upon thy head, dead or alive.
Now go.

Exit Melot.

Is Tristan wounded?

BRANGÆNA

Slightly, my liege; he [faints.

RUAL

That was a coward blow that Melot struck.

KING

The hunt is over, and the heart is slain.
My soul misgives me, oh, how I fear to know
The bald, entire truth.

Exit into castle.

Curtain.

Act III

THE king's audience chamber in Castle Tintagel. The hall is very high, round-arched and vaulted. There are massive pillars to support the arches; and, to the right, is a narrow aisle, between the pillars and the wall. There are entrances to both right and left foreground. In the centre of the hall is an elevated throne, with a single throne chair upon it. The light is given by a burning cresset.

Act III

Late Night

The curtain discovers King Mark alone upon his throne.

KING

A king should be his people in one man.
I've tried to be; but am their griefs alone,
And nothing of their joys. Ah, who would be
A king! Whom can I trust? Deluded fool,
Sport for the nearest of my heart's elect,
Target for all the wandering shafts of shame.
And must I spend my blood in blushes now,
That once would give my every drop for them?
To learn the truth from sources that I hate,
And would have died but to have proven false!
That one I loved and cherished as a son
Should turn the snake to sting my nurturing bosom.
Did Fate need both of them to fail me now
In faithlessness? Whom have I here about
To solace now my life? Its chiefest part
Was spent to rear my kingdom up for him;

Knocking heard at the door, to left.

And now he fails me, and perhaps is dead.

Knocking. Then enter Brangœna.

KING

Thinking it his servant.

Tell everyone I will not be disturbed.

BRANGÆNA

Thy servant has withdrawn to let me in;
I would not be refused.

KING

What—enter here!
Thy shame ought take thee hence; ere my command
Burst out and bid thee go. Darest thou so much
As force thyself? I cannot bear thy face—
Begone.

BRANGÆNA

Oh, king, by all the love that once
Did warm thy heart to those thou long hast loved—
By all the hopes thou hadst of love returned,
Hear me.

KING

Again be gulled by smooth deceit;
And once again be buffeted by lies
From one to th' other? No. Those that I loved
Have dallied with me ill enough till now:
Can I expect the less sin, then, from thee,
To whom I never leaned?

BRANGÆNA

Dost thou prefer
To thus believe all irredeemable?
I cannot gloze it all, nor all the guilt
Extenuate; I am too deep myself;
But they were puppets both for grinning Fate.

KING

Art thou, too, one of Ireland's sorcerers,
That play with Fate and destiny for sport?
I've heard Isolde came from such a stock.
What witchcraft wilt thou practise now on me?
Their sin was patent, glaring, manifest,

Open to view; wouldst thou then call me blind
Or idiotic? Go, my senses fail.
Thunder is hovering o'er thy guilty head.
Go, go; till now I always thought thee far
Too small for punishment. Wake not my ire,
Lest it burn thee too.

BRANGÆNA

I fear it not.
Thine anger could not hurt me half so much
As silence forced, where truth could ease us all.

KING

Aside.

I listened once to Melot for my pain;
Why not to her for solace? God, the truth—
Give me the truth, e'en though the words be spears
Each quivering in my breast.

Aloud.

Now, answer me.
Upon thy life use no evasions, woman.
I would not thus have brought thee to this pass;
Thou'st made thy fate; I did not summon thee;
Now thou art here, so answer truthfully:
How long was Tristan here?

BRANGÆNA

He came at evening, when the hunt rode off.

KING

Isolde knew that he would come to-night?

BRANGÆNA

Yes, my liege, but not before this eve.

KING

How did she know that he would come?

BRANGÆNA

He sent his old retainer, trusty Rual,
To bring his greeting to Isolde and
Announce his coming with the night.

KING

Have they met oft before in secrecy?

BRANGÆNA

They have, my liege, ere Tristan went away.

KING

Oh, faithless ones! and thou didst play thy part,
Always the sentinel to shamelessness,
A looker-out to see the coast was clear,
Doing the service of a withered bawd,
Squat in thy watch-tower on the balcony?

BRANGÆNA

Oh, say not so, my liege, my lord,—

KING

Enough!
Enough—I loathe thee; get thee hence.

BRANGÆNA

I am, perhaps, in guilt; but not so deep.
Hear my whole tale; 'twill win thee to forgive.

KING

What tale can take the blush from off their shame?

BRANGÆNA

Hear me, I pray.

KING

Why does Isolde speak not for herself?
What needs she such as thou to mouth her lies?
These miseries are meant for two alone;
A third, and such a third, intrudes within

What else were hushed in proudest privacy.
What truth can come from one whose life, as thine,
Was one long practise of deceit? Oh, where
Are truth and honour, faith and chastity?
In Tristan all these qualities were met,
And bowed in mutual grace before he fell.
And Tristan's lily smirched, which was as pure
In countenance as it was gold at heart,
How wilted now! How shall I, then, trust thee,
Whose business was a lie; whose only duty
Lay in joining paramours?

BRANGÆNA

My liege, I pray thee, list my tale; and then,
If I in aught have lied, design what tortures,
Punishments, thou wilt for me to endure.
Isolde cannot exculpate herself;
She knows not why she sinned, nor why she lacked
Restraint from what she did.

KING

She knew full well
Her book of self-defense in Melot's case.
It were far better if those two had sinned,
So all my trust in men would not have fallen
When Tristan fell, and all my faith with him.

Enter Tristan, wounded, slowly from the right.

TRISTAN

King Mark, I come here to condemn myself
Of sins by far too deep for thy forgiveness.

Turning away from Brangæna.

But grant me, liege, to witness my own sin;
And not that one whose office I did scorn
Inform against me. I shall tell the truth.

KING

Tristan, thine honour is in jeopardy.
Dost thou stand here a suppliant at my throne?

TRISTAN

I do.

KING

A suppliant ought never wear a sword.

Tristan gives up sword and gauntlet at foot of throne.

KING

Twas never yielded to an enemy:
And now he takes a traitor's sword away,
Who was that traitor's father and his friend.
I did thee wrong in listening to Brangæna;
She pressed herself upon me.

BRANGÆNA

Let me speak;
Ye know not what ye do in ignorance.

Enter Isolde from the right door.

ISOLDE

If both have sinned, my place is at his side.
With him I fell, with him I will be judged.
For me, love knows no higher law than love;
If that be sin, I wait my punishment.

KING

To Isolde.

I offered thee the whole of all my crown;
Thou giv'st me in return thy total shame.

To Tristan.

In thee, Oh, Tristan, did I live again
My whole youth's life, with all my better self

As Mentor. Oh, the pain, the grief, the sadness
And the shame!

TRISTAN

The sin was mine alone;
The weakness hers. Be just; and being just,
Be merciful. Upon my knees I beg,
If ever I have done thee services,
Hear me, as thou wouldst listen to a friend;
Condemn me, as thou wouldst thine enemy.

KING

Speak not to me of chivalrous exploits,
Of nations conquered and of battles won.
What boots the worship at my boundaries,
When thou hast smirched the altars at my hearth?
I looked on thee, at first, as looks the sun
Upon the earth upbrightening in his glance,
That never sees the shadows to his rays.
And then, it seemed, I saw thee not so bright:
Still did I think my eye was dimmed, or that
Perchance some cloud had crept between, and soiled
The open candour of thine honest eye.
I never thought that thou couldst prove me false;
But now I see thy light was all my own.
I have deceived myself in thee.

TRISTAN

Too true.
I cannot exculpate myself; I know
Too well the hellish depth of my disgrace.

KING

Oh, that thou hadst been not so noble once!
There could not now be such a falling off;
Thou couldst not be so base. For thou dost sin
Doubly the more in sinning 'gainst thyself;

And then in sinning 'gainst expectancy.
And treason in high places dims the mark
Of other high achievement. There's a duty,
Having been noble, to continue so;
Else former nobleness seems but deceit.
The buzzing rumours of Sir Launcelot's sin
Have darked the glamour of his services;
And Melot, too, was full of services—
I hate the word.

To Isolde.

Did Melot lure thee, too?

BRANGÆNA

He did, my liege, but never won response.

KING

So pure to Tristan, yet so false to me
Who never killed her kin.

ISOLDE

King Mark,
My wish is potent o'er the wills of men.
No woman's frailty is my excuse,
And where I've trespassed, thou canst make amends.
My guilt was deeper far than Tristan knows.
I never have proved worthy of his love.
He pleaded with me often, begging me,
Beseeching and imploring me to tell
The shameless conduct of our secrecy.
I would not tell thee, fearing for his life,
And I was satisfied with half a joy,
Intenser for its mad anxiety.
He would not play the thief within thy halls,
And so he left me never to return,
But my enchantments brought him back again.

KING

He would not play the thief within my halls!
He stole my honour ere he left. What need
For conscientious scruples after he took
That which his absence never could replace?
Thou wert my wife, the sharer of my throne—

ISOLDE

The world has called me Isolde, Cornwall's queen;
My heart has called me only Tristan's love.
I sinned to Tristan; never sinned to thee.
Where I loved not, I could not even trespass.

KING

Is marriage nothing but a hollow rite?

ISOLDE

A loveless marriage is a harlotry,
Allowed by law, but sinful, low and base.
In this my love for Tristan was impure.

KING

Yet we were wedded, were we not?

ISOLDE

We were; but answer me, my king:
Have I, in all these months, dropped thee a word
That might have been construed as love returned?
Have I not been as cold as icicles,
Remote as winter snow in summer time,
Distant and chill? I've never lied to thee.
Sir Tristan had my whole of heart; I had
No little more to give; and if I had,
I would have been too jealous of that little
Ever to yield it up where love was not.

KING

My pleas can touch thee not; yet know, Isolde,
I loved thee once.

To Tristan.

I sent thee, in all trust,
To Ireland, to woo my bride for me.

TRISTAN

Base Tristan went for thee and served himself.

ISOLDE

I hated Tristan, when he wooed for thee;
And jealousy had killed him thrice ere this,
Had love not conquered in its stead.

KING

Isolde,
I was too proud to plead with thee for love;
Not wishing love unwillingly bestowed,
Or cold withheld. I could not, like a youth,
Make every breath a hot petition fired
Within the breast, and sealed with deathless vows.
My love for thee was like a high respect.
Sometime I hoped and prayed that love would come,
Like unsought buds of spring, reburgeoning
The boughs of last year's fall with new year's bloom.

ISOLDE

Alas! I cannot love but once in life,
As I can die but once. Thy love for me
Was beautiful and tender, like the love
The waning summer feels for its last bud;
When still that bud can never grow to seed.
My heart was gone; I could not make response;
I would not lie to thee more than I did;
And so I held myself aloof from thee.

KING

My love was reckoned naught!

ISOLDE

My heart had leaped the barriers of hate;
Think you 'twould scruple at the bonds of love?

TRISTAN

I overbore her scruples by my sin.
My guilty history is brief to tell.
I slew her uncle Morolt, but was hurt
By him in turn. The festering wound grew worse;
For Morolt's sword was poisoned in the blade.
And here I languished from my deadly wound,
Until I heard there was one single hope,
Isolde of Ireland, far famed for art
And magic means to battle off grim Death.
She knew the soothing balsams that could cure
The cankered wound; for she had stilled the drops
From midnight weeds to venom Morolt's sword,
So like a snake it bit. And so I went
To Ireland in disguise, pale and distressed,
A wandering troubadour.

ISOLDE

Dreamily.

He sang so sweet,
And looked so melancholy large in eye,
I pitied him in pain. He won my love;
And since that time has never lost it, liege.
It seemed his pain had made his lay more sweet,
As I have heard the nightingale doth sing
Pierced by a thorn; and that God pains the hearts
Of poets most who sing the sweetest songs.
I nursed him through my pity to my love.

KING

Would thou hadst died before returning home,
With memory of thy deeds for monuments,
To blazon forth thy chivalry to time.
Where didst thou learn, Isolde, that 'twas he
Who slew thy uncle in the tournament?

ISOLDE

'Twas whispered in my fearful ears by some
Who were with Morolt when he fell, that this
Same minstrel was the doer of that deed.
I then remembered of the poisoned wound.
None but the venom I had stilled could make
So festering a sore. It troubled me—

KING

And couldst thou love him after thou hadst learned
He was thine enemy, whom duty said
Hate might avenge, but friendship never shield?

ISOLDE

I loved him, ere I knew he was a foe.
'Twas not without a struggle that I loved
My country's enemy. It troubled me,
And preyed like a vulture on my guilty thought.
My dreams were troublous and my sleep was vexed;
And, one wild night, when frenzied by a storm,
Madly I hastened from my couch, led on
By unavengèd Morolt from his grave.
I took his battled sword and hastened off;—

BRANGÆNA

I followed her in fear for what might hap;
Yet feared to speak to her, she looked so wild,
And muttered low, and moaned along the hall;
As if the wind, torn loose from out the storm,
Were wandering through a cavern. Treading soft
And stealthily she opened Tristan's door,—

TRISTAN

Cease, cease, thou meddling gossip; leave thy tales.
King Mark, I've told thee all there is to say.

ISOLDE

He knows not how the fates have ordered this:
May heaven witness to the truth I tell.
I left my couch, and opened Tristan's door;
And there he lay, in bloom of growing health,
Lulled like a babe, asleep upon his arm,
Swung in the cradle of a lover's dream.
The storm that rocked the battlements to fear
Sang him but deeper in repose. It seemed
He lisped some snatch of song from far Provence,
Of falling rivers and the laughing sea.
I swung my uncle's deadly sword aloft.
There came a wandering smile to Tristan's lips:
He called "Isolde," and murmured of his love.
The vision fled; the sword fell from my grasp:
He, startled by the clang, woke up amazed;
I sank in sobs upon his breast.

BRANGÆNA

I drew her gently by her nerveless hand,
And led her to her chilly couch again.
She followed like a child, or one in dream;
So madly overwrought, she had no will.
They knew they loved each other.

KING

Say you so,
You loved each other, ere you came to Cornwall?

TRISTAN

Too well, my liege, indeed, and yet too ill.
I followed up advantages in love:
She was a flower cloistered in the walls;

And I was come, with all the great renown
Of Arthur's court to plead in my behalf.
I loved her in my dreams; and in the day
I dreamed again the visions of the night.
And when the avalanche of sin was loosed,
My will was weak and guilty: I preferred
To let myself be borne upon its drift,
Rather than stem its constant growing might.
What arts, what courtesies, a knight could use
Against unarmèd innocence, I used,
And thrived in her affection. I grew base,
Electing rather to be loved than honoured;
Serving the goddess of the easier rites
Than Chastity, whose worship is restraint,
And not indulgence. This, oh king, is but
The mildest name that weakness gives offense.
I sinned and dragged Isolde down with me;
My weakness sapped her strength, and so she fell.
There is no more to say, no pleas to make,
No fears that *my* guilt may be magnified;
For 'tis impossible.

BRANGÆNA

To Tristan.

Be not so rash!
Thou wrong'st Isolde in thy violent haste.

To king.

Until this time their love was saintly pure:
I never shall forget the day it fell.

ISOLDE

I loved my enemy. Too soon there came
A summons calling Tristan to his home
In far-off Bretigny; for Rual came
Deploring that his realm had fallen away.

KING

Was Rual always second in the plot?
I thought that there was honesty itself
Dressed out in roughness. Could he, too, play knave,
And hire himself to play a part like thine?
Ah, yes,—he, too, was on the watch and guard,—
Rual, Rual—

TRISTAN

He thought his master never could do wrong.

Tristan feels his wound and seems to grow weaker.

KING

To Brangæna.

Nor thou thy mistress. Well wouldst thou have served,
Hadst thou but been so daring for their love,
When 'twas an honourable love; not now,
Or since that time.

To Isolde.

Why did you not wed then?
All would have been far happier.

ISOLDE

I could not;
For then 'twas whispered loudly who he was,
This wandering minstrel in the castle walls.
Fearing for him, I bade him flee my home;
For Morolt's friends meant ill, and 'twas unsafe.
He left with deep sworn vows, and promises
Of soon return. Within a meagre year
He came again to Ireland, to woo
His mistress for thy spouse. My father heard
With open pleasure all the offered plans:
Tristan should woo Isolde for thy bride,
And Cornwall join with Ireland in peace.

Tristan made effort to forget his love:
My pride, touched to the quick by his reserve,
Soon poisoned all my love to hate again.
I felt that I had been betrayed by him;
I could not love thee, never had seen thee yet;
And yet loved Tristan though I tried to hate him.

KING

Why cam'st thou, then; did Tristan bid thee come?

ISOLDE

He brought thy bidding, added none of his.

BRANGÆNA

'Tis true. I was at court when Tristan came,
And was Isolde's ear of confidence.
Oh mistress, let me speak, I know the tale;
And have recited it full many a time
In restless nights, when fearful of thy fate.
Isolde would not come at first, my liege;
But then her mother reasoned with her thus:
That thou wert brave and noble, much revered
And lovable; and there were duties, too,
Which ought to oversway the selfish choice.
The marriage would bring peace to all her people.
Further, the old queen whispered in her ear:
"Isolde, here are potions rare and strong:
The one for deadly wounds and injuries;
The other is a poison, that will eat
The very roots of life, and leave no trace
Disfeaturing the trunk: this canst thou use
To free thee from the galling weight of life,
If it become too burdensome to bear.
And last, most precious and of all the best,
Here, in the casket, is a phial of love,
A philter, culled from every amorous bud,

Opened at midnight under wistful moons.
Its colour is the deep red of the passion rose;
Quaff this with Mark and ye shall live and love."
These were the last words of the mother queen.

KING

Is that the way ye love in Ireland?
A magic love of potions drunk and swallowed,
Gulped at a wink; hearts in a cup of wine?

ISOLDE

I made a vow I would not drink the draught.
Since Tristan failed in proof of love, I came,
Half following the finger of my fate;
Half in a spite to show I had no love.
My pride was boasting that it had no heart,
When pride was but the voice of wounded love.
We set out on the voyage. Tristan stood
E'en at the helm, at far remove from us,
Seeking a solace in the rolling seas;
His honour putting bars between our hearts
Which even then ought have been joined in love.
He never spoke to me until we came
In sight of Cornwall. Then on nearing land,—

KING

And were ye chaste until ye landed here;
And then lost all your scruples at a trice,
To shelter guile beneath my loving wing?

ISOLDE

What ails thee, Tristan?

TRISTAN

My wound has bled afresh.

BRANGÆNA

Isolde asked that Tristan come to her
Before they landed.

TRISTAN

I never should have come;
And yet I came. If ever thou hast loved me,
Grant me the boon of timely penitence;
Be merciful to her whose life I wrecked,
And let me die. My wound is keen, I go
With nothing more to say; but shall return
To hear my doom.

KING

Nay, rest to hear it now.
We three can never dwell beneath one roof;
Tintagel Castle, where king Uther died,
The mighty founder of a line of kings,
Is now too small to hold its three possessors.
My human pity never learned revenge;
There is no malice in my punishment.
The pillory of public banishment
Will not be pressed on thee; but thou must go,
Parting as secretly as thou hast come.
Thou art not pure enough to seek the Grail;
For he who compasses that high devoir
Must guiltless be, and pure as virgin lilies.
Go, then, thy better self will pray for thee;
Devote thyself to vows and blessed works;
Until the saints, whose joy is saving souls,
Absolve thy heart. I, too, in time, shall add
What prayers forgiveness may find tongue to speak.
My blessings go as wayfarers with thee.
Go, go; I never wish to see thy face again.

TRISTAN

I thank thee for thy mercy, king and judge.
If I have found thy clemency, though guilty,
Be more than justly merciful to her
Whom I have wronged.

Tristan bows to his knees, kisses the hem of the king's garment, struggles to his feet and, tottering, leaves the chamber.

Isolde hesitates a moment, turns appealingly to the king, and then, looking after Tristan, goes toward the door. She turns to the king again and says:

ISOLDE

I follow him in wish,—why not in deed?

The king watches her in pained silence withdraw to the threshold; then she returns impulsively and says:

'Twere best that all be open now at last.

KING

What hast thou still to say? 'Twere futile now
To leave the tale unfinished as it is.

ISOLDE

'Tis quickly told. We came in sight of land;
Brangæna summoned Tristan from the helm.

BRANGÆNA

Thrice I was sent to him and thrice refused.

ISOLDE

Unwillingly he came to me at last.

She pauses.

BRANGÆNA

There glowed some dreadful menace in her eye;
And when Sir Tristan came, she chided him
For keeping far aloof throughout the voyage.
Tristan replied his honour bade him stay
Guarding the bride, yet speaking not with her.
There sprang a scorned retort to Isolde's lips:

"Thou dost not think the king has aught to fear
From thee?" He blushed and bowed, and answered not;
But acted haughtily. I saw the love
Struggle to his eyes, yet faint upon his tongue.
He knew too well that if he showed his love,
Isolde would have never married thee.

KING

Was honour always in the way of love,
Keeping you separate till thou wast a wife,
That lust might have a freer license then?

ISOLDE

'Tis a long story both of love and pride,
Honour and hate, 'gainst fate and destiny.
The pride that aided Tristan in his duty,
Flared to a hate in me. I told the knight
How he had trifled with my happiness.
Sir Tristan answered not; but love and pain
Sat in the eye where pride and faith had dwelt.
He listened, curbed like a restive, mettled steed,
To my rebuke, without a word to say.
I whispered hoarsely in Brangæna's ear,
That I would far prefer to die with him
That I once loved, than live my days with thee.
Said hurriedly my heart could not be bartered,
Bought thus and sold to make a petty peace:
Murmured I loved Sir Tristan well enough
To die with him in love; yet hated him
Sufficiently to make him die with me.

BRANGÆNA

Then turned she with triumphant scorn about,
Saying that she would pledge her faith in wine:
"One single cup to bury hatred in;
I would no longer hate my husband's kin—"

ISOLDE

And, pointing to the deadly phial, I said:
"Brangæna, pour this in the chalice there;
Say that my honour could not brook the sale."

KING

Wouldst thou have poisoned both? 'Twas desperate!

BRANGÆNA

Her eye burned on the casket; then she paused.
I trembled, knew not what to do; some power
Forced me to obey. To save them both, I poured
The potent potion of the amorous phial.
I knew the other would have killed them both.

KING

And did you drink of this?

ISOLDE

We did, my liege.
Tristan suspected that his death was near,
And smiled at him upon the chalice brim.
He read the meaning in my baleful glance;
And said: "Oh, lose thy hate, let's bury all."
So Tristan lifted it unto his lips,
Drinking the goblet fully to the half.
I snatched the fateful cup: I saw the red,
The deep red passionate tint, looked wild at *her*,
Pointing to Brangæna.
Cursed the deception, yet I drank the dregs.

KING

They drank the potion that was meant for me!

BRANGÆNA

She never would have drunk it, had she known
Ere Tristan drained it, what the chalice held.
They drank of death, yea, death to their hate and vows.

His honour drowned in that fell drink; her hate
Expired. They fell into each other's arms;
The love which they interred rose up reborn,
Full winged, for all eternity.

KING

Oh, strange!
Oh, heavy, heavy, heavy grief! Go on.

BRANGÆNA

Isolde dimly knew what she had done.
She stood as one in stupour waiting death;
And Tristan knew not why he burned again.
Isolde, when she saw 'twas life that came
Instead of death, it seemed to her that heaven
Had merely stooped to earth; no common air
Was that she breathed.

ISOLDE

The rest thou knowest.

KING

Alas, too well. When did she learn the truth?
This is the very recklessness of love.

BRANGÆNA

She did not ask to know what phial she drank
Until much later, on the very day
That followed Tristan's going from thy court;
When they had made their seeming last farewell.
Perhaps she meant then to have quaffed with thee;
But then I told her of the circumstance.
She smiled through all her tears, said 'twas a star
That beamed on Tristan's soon return from far.

KING

Knows Tristan aught of this?

ISOLDE

Nothing, my liege.
I scorned to tell him of the potion's power.

Isolde withdraws to her exit; with a gesture of absolute despair, she says:

My heart is bleeding in Sir Tristan's wound
And thy disgrace. There's nothing more to say.
The tale is told. Farewell. Mine was the guilt,
His was the suffering and thine the shame.
God give thee grace.

Exit.

KING

Ere this did Isolde ever ask this drink for me?

BRANGÆNA

I broached it once on shipboard, but she said,
She never would be medicined to love.
She had one heart to give and that was gone.
Her love was not requited; so to fill
The empty aching space a frenzy grew.

KING

My love for them would have thee innocent;
That love has asked belief from willing ears.
Pray leave me now; I am not clear in mind
Or heart or purpose; only know this, madam,
Whate'er I do will not be in revenge,
But in forgiveness. Tristan must away;
The commons shall not cry that he has made
A cuckold of their king. I cannot go.
This place is blotted for him till he leave.
Pardon will fall upon him like a grace
When all his open penances are done;
And he is shriven of his magic fault.
Then will the people hail him for their king,
Who now would smother curses under breath,

And choke his hopes. Leave me now, and pray
That Melot's sword was not too deeply thrust.
Where's Melot? Call my servant here. His life
Will answer Tristan's lightest wound.

Exit Brangæna; reenter, immediately, Brangæna with servant.

Where's Melot, sir?
Sawest thou him leave the castle in the night?

SERVANT

Drunk.

He left no letter, no missive and no purse. He's a stingy, blackguardly caitiff, is this Melot. He crossed my toll path many times and never left a single groat for toll. 'Twas only Rual and the hunters; and they may all have back their purses (*drawing them out and feeling them*). Oh, fie! they're empty; I drank them up, and I'll no letter-carrying further. The purses stuck my tongue to the roof of my mouth; but since I have spent them I am free to speak again. I'll no letter-carrying further. I brought one to Lady Brangæna, and she received it by my word of mouth. Didst thou not, madam? I never thought thy ugliness could hold so good a man as Rual is. But they did meet, and speak, my liege. Now deny it, lady, if thou canst. The other letters were to mistress Isabel. Oh, my liege, so much hot love it burned my hand; and I opened the seal to see what was contained in it,—for the safety of the building. Love had warped and twisted their brains. Insanity blew from out their gaping words, like hot air through a cracked furnace door. By my soul, I couldn't understand a word of it; so their purses bought them nothing,—not even my silence,—ha, ha! How could I speak of the contents, when no sane man could write nor read nor utter them?

KING

What letters, man?

SERVANT

Two letters, my liege, by thy leave, for mistress Isabel; nay, without thy leave, for mistress Isabel. For the first I got an added fee, for it joyed her much; and she did smile and weep and droop with the eye; but for the second one I brought her—ough—I stood awhiles she read it, hoping for another purse for pleasant services—when, oh Lord! I hear a sudden command of "Out, you rascal!" "Rascal," sir, she called the message bearer to the nobility of the realm, the Mercury of the Kingdom. And that foul slander was the beginning of my overthrow. I'll no more on the business. I thought to have kept a clerk, but no more, no more—

KING

Art thou drunk, man?
I asked thee but if Melot left the castle.

SERVANT

I am not drunk because Melot left the castle. I didn't see him leave. I've told your majesty he's a tight-fisted, miserly caitiff — an opener of doors— without fees. No one ever yet got drunk when he came or when he left.

KING

Go, get thee gone.
Thy wealth has stolen thy wit. *Exit servant.*
Brangæna, see
That the seneschal procure this man's discharge.
We shall learn later of Lord Melot's doings.
Then get thee to thy chamber and repose.
Night still is brooding o'er the darkened earth;
And thou must be well rested for the morrow,
Too big with all our future happiness

To suffer weak essays. Good night. Calm dreams
Will wander through thy purgèd conscience now,
As angels wafting through the zones of heaven.
Sir Tristan's wound will stay him till the dawn.

BRANGÆNA

My will is servant to thy wish; but I,
If thy permission grant it, would have spoken
To Isolde yet this night.

KING

I shall consult with holy men till dawn.
Send thou the chaplain to the oratory;
And bid him rouse no others as he comes.

Exit Brangæna.

KING

Oh, God, that I brought pain where most I felt
A joy in giving joy. Why didst not speak,
Isolde or Brangæna, Tristan, all?
Ye might have found in me a willing friend;
Who long through ignorance was made a foe.
I should have known it, seen that I was old;
The mystery and magic of young love
Are passed from me. Had I not eyes to see?
I often felt that what Isolde gave
Was only all the heaping love I offered,
Returned again to me, with nothing more
Added by her. Oh, Tristan, Tristan, son!
I now forgive thee all, yes, freely all.
Thou wast the heir-apparent to my throne;
I loved thee not as nephew, but as son;
And would have given thee thy lovely queen.
There is but one allotment in our love.
Let future be the health and remedy
For ills the past inflicts.

Curtain.

Act IV

THE throne chamber in Castle Tintagel. The architecture is of the same character as that of Act III. There are two entrances from the left, and one entrance from the right. To the rear there is a large portal opening on a balcony, from which the forest can be discerned. In the centre of the room there is a large elevated dais, with two throne chairs. A baldachin extends over the dais. In the right foreground is a long, low couch draped with royal robes. Next to this there is a console, upon which is placed a burning taper.

Act IV

Before Dawn

The curtain discovers Tristan alone, lying on a low couch.

TRISTAN

Alone again. Was that a dizzy dream
Of banishments, and partings, and of tortures,
The wounds, the leech, Isolde, and the king?
No, no—too real, too sadly, coldly, real—
My poor Isolde, what wilt thou do now?
Oh, sun, turn back again the steeds of day,
Be pliant to the suppliant prayers of men;
Bring yester eve afresh upon the world;
Roll back the dragon chariot of night;
And take me with thee far away again.
Thou, like the past, art stubborn, fixed and deaf,
Hard and irrevocable. Oh, harlot world,
Thou hast grown agèd over night; and yet
Thy hollow semblable appears the same.
I am like thee, yet still I can revile
When anger gives me words. Oh, painted world!
Oh, world, so nearly what thou wast before!
Our grief ought bid thee make a greater change.
Thy last night struck thee sudden into age.—
Why com'st thou now to show thyself again,
To woo man forth to heavy heart-sick joys?
And must I leave thee, Isolde, with the day—
Oaths broken, honour shamed, the table round
Disgraced and sullied with unchastity?
Launcelot and myself, twin-starred in honour

When we rose; now joined in equal sin,
Our sinking star is falling into night,
And pales before the gray of this sad morn.

Enter Isolde, unseen by Tristan.

TRISTAN

Joy is a bubble blown of vanity,
That bursts when hands that clutch to reach it, touch
Its fragile shimmering. It can live
Only by being high beyond our grasp;
Man is the Tantalus that yearns to it.

ISOLDE

I have thee yet and thou hast me again;
The bubble is not burst. Art thou in pain?
When sleep lay nestled on thine eyelids closed,
I left to see the leech who bound thy wound;
He hath pronounced it trivial and slight,
And easy to be remedied.

TRISTAN

Isolde,
I feel no pain in it when thou art near;
But if thou leave me, then it gnaws again.
I slept because I felt that thou wert by;
And I awoke upon thy going hence.
How came we to this royal chamber, love?

ISOLDE

I led thy fainting footsteps hitherward.

TRISTAN

Looking at the two throne chairs.

This is no place for thee and me to be.

ISOLDE

Thy weakness pressed the choice of place upon me;
Here must thou rest till daybreak.

TRISTAN

And then leave.
Isolde, Isolde, forgive the pain I caused;
I tried to shield thee from entire guilt;
Why didst thou speak of magic and enchantments?
Thou didst condemn thyself.

ISOLDE

Did it avail
To lighten thine offence, it served me well.
But know, oh, Tristan, that I meant it not.
I ever wished to love thee and be loved
As a mere woman. What enchantment gives,
It takes away from me and from my love:
I feel no debt to any means beyond
The simple impulse of the native heart.
I wish to love thee only as my sex
Can love a man, but deeper; and be loved
By thee as by the noblest of thy sex,
But better; as more hopeful to be loved,
Because I loved thee too so utterly.

TRISTAN

And so I love thee, and I wish to love.
Thy love has been the loadstar of my life;
Then comes the banishment, and, like a knife,
Cleaves our united heart in twain. Isolde,
Dawn will come and set his glowing torches
On the highest hills whose bases gloom the west;
And then will light the turrets of this keep,
To flare our shame out to th' entire world:
And I must go.

ISOLDE

And I shall follow thee.

TRISTAN

My heart is galloping away with thee—
Isolde, I cannot leave thee, yet I feel
I cannot drag thee forth to sneers and shame.

ISOLDE

The shame is equal if I go or stay.

TRISTAN

King Mark's full clemency will never fail;
He is a tree that, wounded, yields a balm,
Which like a benediction pities all.

ISOLDE

Could Christ's own pity fill me like thy love?

TRISTAN

I am a sorrow-doomèd man, a child
Of sorrow born, to sorrow dedicate.

ISOLDE

There is no joy for me where thou art not;
With thee all suffering is sublimed to bliss.

TRISTAN

The king, my foster father and my friend!
I have the sin and have his blessings too;
And later come his prayers for me. Isolde,
I've stolen away his love; and can we hope
For God's or his forgiveness, when we keep
The proceeds of my theft, which penitence
Ought rather render up again to him,
Than selfishness retain?

ISOLDE

Render me up!
As though my love were a commodity?
I never found thee selfish until now.

Think once of me. How can I linger here—
And yet my pride ought never ask this of thee—
How can I ever live apart from thee?
We would have fled together ere this dawn,
Had Mark not come between to sever us.
Why halt we now and tremble at the flight?

TRISTAN

I cannot build my paradise upon
The scattered wrecks of others' happiness.
If I were dead thou mightest yet be saved.

ISOLDE

But, while thou livest, I will share thy guilt.

TRISTAN

Aside.

"But, while thou livest, I will share thy guilt."

To Isolde.

And canst thou love me muddied as I am
With foul disgrace and open obloquy?

ISOLDE

And I—am I not muddied too?
Yet thou hast said thou lov'st me none the less;
There's nothing more to lose but life itself.
Death stands before me, like a huge Colossus,
One foot upon the hopes, the other pressed
Upon the wailing fears of men; and time
Flows with a sluggard stream of days below
To dark eternities.

TRISTAN

But leave me now.

ISOLDE

I'll share thy exile with thee; let me go.
Thou art my rescue, my deliverance:

I shall not leave thee till thou promise me
That I may go.

TRISTAN

Isolde, torture me not,
I leave thee with a deathless, timeless kiss.
I shall be true to thee forever—go.
I hear a stir upon the threshold!

Slight noise.

Farewell—thou shouldst not be discovered here.
God will resolve it all—a last farewell—
If ever thou hast loved me, leave me now.

Kisses her, and presses her through the door.

TRISTAN

"There's nothing more to lose but life itself."
My hopes for thee and prayers for thy soul,
Beyond the perils of this life's last throe,
Beyond the wild regret of earthly sin,
Will nerve me to my death. I love thee, Isolde,
With such a love as gives up all on earth
In barter for the joy in lives to come.
I will not wreck thee more than I have done;
And dash thy chance of bliss beyond the grave.
I look upon thee as a mariner,
With sail struck for the sea, and swelling winds
To scud him wildly from the sinking shore;
Who sees gray distance widening as he looks;—
And never will return.

Enter Melot. Tristan falls on his knee before Melot, who is in the disguise of a wandering friar.

TRISTAN

Clasping the hem of Melot's garment.

Thou art a holy man and welcome here,

Where those of orders always are received
Hospitably by him who rules this land.
Thou comest pure from vigils of the night;
Thy prayers have brought thee very near to God;
So let me kneel to thee. Oh, shrive me,
Holy father; give thy blessings now;
Unload thy soul of all its saintliest goods;
Thou couldst forever further onward go,
And never find a man who needs them more.

Melot turns away.

Is there a sin contagious to the touch?
Oh, leave me not without thy prayers for me.
Direct a sinner's footsteps to his God;
And God will bless thee even though thou fail.

Tristan looks up, and examines Melot more closely.

Thou wear'st a crucifix stuck in thy belt
As if it were a sword!
Dagger in hand!

Then rising suddenly, he strikes off Melot's cowl.

Melot!!

MELOT

I am he. Thou and thy paramour
Have thus undone me; but I am not gone.
I leave my traces when I go. I came
To see thee here alone.

TRISTAN

Most welcome, Melot.
Thou com'st to me as fate made visible;
I do not fear thee.

MELOT

Thou hast escaped me once,
When I had less a cause to hate thee; now,
My banishment is added to thy score;
And I am here to wreak my whole account.

TRISTAN

People have said thou wast mine enemy,
Nursing against my life a constant hate,
Sharpened with all the pangs of jealousy.
I look upon thee now as on a friend.
My life has been a sad accomplishment;
Come, free from the long years of regret:
Thou dost a charity and not a crime.
Thy first attempt was but a schoolboy thrust.
Thou'rt grown as old as I am in disgrace,
We both are equals now and banished:
So strike me deep: search thou the bursting heart
Where I have treasured all Isolde's love,
And kill us both upon a single blow.
Strike deep, and I shall think thine emulous hate
Is kindness turned a little from its path.

MELOT

I came not here to bandy words with thee:
Thou ever hadst a poet's silken speech,
Gilded and adulterate to seduce
Successfully.

TRISTAN

Melot, wilt thou not strike!
Oh, have no fears for empty Tristan now.
Thou seest me here, dishonoured and unarmed,
My prowess gone, my valiancy rebuked,
Too cowardly to face my life again,
And yet too cowardly to *take* my life.

See, see, I offer thee my bosom bare,
Prepared for thy best stroke; be merciful
And make a swift dispatch.

MELOT

Dost think that I would favour where I hate?

TRISTAN

Art thou turned coward too? When I was armed,
No hesitation locked thy scabbard—oh,
Thou art a fighter when the king is near;
His presence is thy courage; his applause
Thy highest valour. An unarmed, wounded man,
Brave in despair, outbraves the armèd coward.

Laughs.

MELOT

Hush, fool, thou art a flesh to feed my knife,
Made hungry by its taste of carrion blood.
Good fortune raised thee up above my head;
Ambition made me equal; banishment
Lowers again my hopes to thy despair.
That shrew Isolde, she, thine Irish bitch,
Whelped in a famine time of sorcery,
Hath wrought this havoc.

TRISTAN

Thou hound, thou fiend of hell,
Thou darest not mention such an holy name,
'Twould win for thee admittance into heaven:
Hell's jaws are gaping for thee, damnèd curse!

Tristan makes wild gestures for a sword, forgetting that the king has disarmed him in dishonour.

Oh, for a sword—a weapon—oh, for a sword—

MELOT

Laughing.

The harlot could not thrive so well at home

Among her kind; and so they sent her out
A scourge upon her foes.

TRISTAN

Blaspheming dog,
I'll choke thee for that speech.

Tristan, though unarmed, makes for Melot. A fierce struggle ensues. Melot stabs Tristan with a dagger.

TRISTAN

Oh, I am slain—

MELOT

The air is freer now.

Melot drags Tristan up to king's throne chair.

MELOT

I'll throne thee in thy death. Thou hast aspired,
Turning all means to steps up to this seat.
Thou hast bewitched the general tongue of praise.
Isolde would have had thee secretly
The sharer of her sway; the foolish Mark
Appointed thee to be his sceptre's son;
But Melot made thee king, and gave thee a throne!
Now mock thy station with thy pallid corpse.

Throwing one of the royal robes from the dais upon him.

I'll have thee habited as is a king.
Thou'rt pale and anxious with new-gotten power;
And newborn honour weighs thee pitifully.
Isolde should be here to fill her seat;
And Cornwall would rejoice to see his death,
So well anticipated.

Exit Melot to the right.
Enter Rual from the left.

RUAL

The king has told me Tristan should be here.
Oh, master—sit not in the kingly throne!
Wake, wake, the day is gray upon the eastern clouds—
The ban begins at dawn. The king's at mass.
I begged thy sword from him before he left:
He sends it back to thee, yet must thou go
Immediately upon a pilgrimage,
To visit shrines and pray for absolution;
For so the holy man has well advised.
But as I came, hoarse-whispered treachery
Seemed creeping through the echoing castle walls—
Melot has minions that will serve his will—
Thou hearest me, master,—thou must haste away—
Why starest thou so stonily! 'tis Rual—

Plucking the robe off.

Blood and new wounds! Oh, treason! hadst thou no arms?
He's yet alive—Help! Help!
I know the only man that could have aimed
This undefended blow; I know the man!
Help—help!

Enter Isolde and Brangæna from different sides.

BRANGÆNA

Help—help! Who did this hellish deed?

RUAL

Melot. No other sword thrusts in the dark
Against defenceless valour.
Here is Tristan's sword, fruitless and bootless,
Useless, come too late.

ISOLDE

Tristan, oh, wake, 'tis thine Isolde calls;
Take me with thee in death, I promised so.

I'll journey with thee whither thou wilt go;
But wake and bid me come. Smile only once
Before thy death, and I shall follow thee.

Isolde seizes sword and would have made away with herself, but Brangæna restrains her.

BRANGÆNA

He lives, Isolde.

Isolde swoons over Tristan's body.

BRANGÆNA

Good Rual, speed thee hence to embark with Tristan;
Take him away—take him away—
For secret murder has a million arms;
And weakness is as trustful as a lamb
That licks the slaughter knife.

RUAL

I'll bear him off
As soon as I have staunched his wound.
The king this morning summoned me to him,
And gave me back my master's sword again,
Which he had ta'en away, too late returned.

BRANGÆNA

Some one will help thee bear him to the strand.
If God be willing, ye may leave ere noon.
And thou, Isolde, waken from thy swoon;
And yet I would not waken thee to grief;
Faint into sleep, Isolde.
Now the day
Peeps with his garish, staring eye about;
And things grow desolately clear again:
The kindly veil of night is rent; no shadow,
Merciful to shield thee, lurks behind.

Sound of horns: Brangæna runs to balcony.

The hunters straggle from the wearied chase
Homeward through the forest.

ISOLDE

Half in swoon.

The horns, the horns!
I hear a horn, the trumpet to our doom.
Flee, Tristan, flee—I hear the horns again—
Haste onward, onward, let me ride with thee;
Thou must not leave me.

BRANGÆNA

Hush, hush, Isolde.

Enter Gervaine.

GERVAINE

We lost his majesty upon the hunt;
Has he arrived?

BRANGÆNA

King Mark is safe at home,
And he commands the privacy of his room.

All the time shielding Isolde and Tristan.

GERVAINE

We missed him in the heat and broil of chase;
And wandered through the by-paths of the woods,
Fearing he'd fallen or had met mishap.
And then, upon the homeward way this morn,
We met his charger riderless and loose,
Treading the trail to find his master lost.

BRANGÆNA

The king is safe and well, adieu.

GERVAINE

God be with thee. Where is Isabel?
What! Tristan!

BRANGÆNA

Thy lady bides within;
Go thou and summon her.

Exit Gervaine.

'Tis Isabel's belovèd; he has seen them,
And knows no doubt the whole sad history.

Enter Isabel and Gervaine.

ISABEL

Oh, lady, lady, what has happed again?
Gervaine, remain here, leave me not—my queen—

BRANGÆNA

To Isabel.

Thou canst yet serve thy queen through thy beloved.
Aid me in this; and let thy sanctioning love
Be minister unto our mutual fates.

To Gervaine.

Hold, huntsman, thou dost know the readiest roads
That shorten to the sea; 'tis but a pace;
Wilt thou give hand to aid this wounded knight,
And carry him aboard? I shall requite thee.
Fear not; all is right.

GERVAINE

Tristan, wounded!
And art thou Rual? What a bloody deed
Is this!

RUAL

Give help, this is no time for gaping wonder.

BRANGÆNA

Thy queen bids thee make haste.

ISABEL

Deserve my love by some such deed as this;
And I am thine. Isolde is my queen;

I rise or fall with her; go, we shall meet.
But tarry not, know I am thine alone;
And do this service here for love of me.

GERVAINE

Thy lightest wishes are my decalogue:
I shall deserve thy love.

Rual and Gervaine carry Tristan off. Isolde is aroused, and cries out.
Curtain.

Act V

THE approach to Lionel's castle on the coast of Cornwall. To the right is the spacious entrance to the barbacan, and exterior walls and battlements. In the rear is the large stretching view of the open sea. The path from the castle gate extends across the stage to the left, and disappears in the low trees and shrubbery. There is a low mound of turf in centre foreground.

The distant melancholy call of the sea is heard constantly during the progress of this Act.

Act V

Twilight of the Next Day

Enter Rual and Gervaine from left, carrying Tristan.

RUAL

So, lift him gently, Gervaine.
There is some hope; the wound has ceased to bleed.
This is Sir Lionel's castle; we must rest.
Go thou and ask him for his willingness
To shelter Tristan; till his further strength
Enable further going.

GERVAINE

I shall announce
Our coming.

RUAL

Importune him; take no refusal
Even from his most reluctant fears.

GERVAINE

He was a loyal friend of Tristan,
And will not fail him now, I hope; though oft
Calamity has turned a life-old friend
Quick into a new enemy. We know
That Time and Fate were ever alchemists,
Turning the old to new, and new to old,
By new events cast in the crucible;
And few can stand the constant test and be
Unchanged.

RUAL

Words well said, but breath ill spent. My friend,
Be this another test, and fail me not;
Thou hast been strain-proof up till now.

GERVAINE

I go.

Exit.

RUAL

Were Melot's throat once firm within this hand,
I'd make him loll his treasonous tongue about
Without the breath to feed it into words.
Oh, what a blow! Struck without defence;
Unknightly sped with desperate success;
Malice and vengeance, jealousy and hate
All giving strength against this noble breast,
Wounded and weak. But God, oh, generous God,
Give me this wretch within my sword's wide circle;
Let him be armèd proof 'gainst thunderbolts,
I yet will cleave him down. How many men
Better than Melot have been thrown to earth
Unhorsed, chagrined, yet noble in defeat!
Ought Melot thus in basest cowardice
Escape? He's banished, for he cannot clear
His guilty soul of what the king has charged.
To seek his death will be *my* pilgrimage:
I'll hunt his fleeing shadow all the life
That will be left, if Tristan be restored.
Ye saintly ones in heaven, pray for him;
Be not so jealous of the earth's last knight,
To steal our star and leave us in the dark.
My tongue has never caught the trick of prayer;
But, God, spare Tristan; let his wound be healed.
He breathes so lightly that the air scarce moves,
It loves to hover o'er those parted lips;
But yet so pale—

Enter Gervaine.

GERVAINE

Rual, Sir Lionel
Hath said:—

RUAL

'Tis well and 'tis indifferent to me.
He could not see him thus and then refuse;
We must rest here, no matter what he said.
We cannot bring him farther. Many thanks
For thy kind service to my dying lord.

GERVAINE

I have told him what has happed. Good Lionel,
The owner of this castle, bids me say
That he will take upon himself the brunt
Of braving the king's anger, should it fall
On him for offering a refuge to the knight.
He is an enemy to Melot, sworn of old.
But see, he comes. I'll take me hence.

Enter Lionel.

RUAL

Stay, thou mayest be of service yet, my friend;
'Twill be an honour to have served in this.
Thy duties have deserved still higher trust.

GERVAINE

I'll back along the road again. 'Twas said,
Before we left, that some would after us
Attempt the road. We swerved from off the highway,
Coming here. I'll post a messenger
To announce where we are come.

LIONEL

So go;
Let there be no more secrecy in this.

Exit Gervaine.

Then thou art Rual. Is this Tristan here,
Humbled in pain by such a treasonous sword?
Melot long hated him; he always feared
For Tristan's influence with the loyal king.
His envious ambition saw in him
A step up to the throne on which it fell;
And so he sought to crumble it away.
He breathed foul perjuries against the knight,
Before he found the deeds that could support them.
Lord Tristan was belovèd of us all.

Raising his voice.

I'll brand this Melot in the tourney lists
Foul mouthed and slanderous.

RUAL

Soft, Lionel; he moves.

TRISTAN

Isolde, thou must flee with me;

Deliriously.

I die, if thou come not or stay too long.
Sing once again the song I taught to thee
Far off in Ireland.

RUAL

She's here, my lord;
Have but a little patience.

TRISTAN

Rual here!
What dost thou here? Hast thou forsook thy watch?
Stay in the barbican! Isolde, love,
Thou'rt long in getting ready for thy flight.
'Tis growing light, I smell the freshened dews;
And we must speed ere dawn.
Oh, haste thee,—come, come, come, come.
It seems I faint in expectation, love;
And all the world grows dim again and dark.

LIONEL

What mystery is this discovered here?

RUAL

His memory has lost its dizzy way;
And wanders blinded and without a guide,
Through labyrinths of a half forgotten past.

TRISTAN

I hear the sea; I see the sea, Isolde;
And thy dark eyes o'erbrimming like the sun,
Some dark red fluid at my glowing lips,
That trembles in my veins and arteries,
Like the tumultuous sea. I drown, I drown;
And yet I hate the land, the cursèd land—

RUAL

She soon will come, brave Tristan, never fear.

TRISTAN

Oh, how it rocks and storms!
List to the wind shriek; all is dark.
My fingers fall on some familiar lute;
I sing to thee, yet dost thou never come.

Enter Gervaine with Isolde, who kneels over Tristan.

ISOLDE

He lives—

GERVAINE

I found her wandering like a stricken fawn,
As blindly in the day as if 'twere night,
Lost in the tangled woods.

Enter Isabel and guide hurriedly.

ISABEL

The queen is here. She mumbled eerie charms
Of night and day, and chanted to the moon,

That died and faded and could not be seen;
And then we lost her; for she slipped away
While we were resting.

GERVAINE

I longed for thee to come.

LIONEL

It nears the end, I fear; he wanders far;
And yet the king should come, if but to ease
His soul's last flight with his forgiveness.
Rual,
Wilt thou go, or shall I go myself?

RUAL

Not I.
Go thou the byways; Gervaine took the road,
And did not see them. I must stay by Tristan;
My place is by his side.

ISOLDE

Tristan, 'tis I; 'tis thy Isolde here.

TRISTAN

Deliriously.

Here hast thou wounded me. Isolde, speak.
I saw thee in my dream open my door;
I heard melodious mutterings at my bed.
Here hast thou wounded me, alas, too deep.
Why that false, treacherous blow?
I saw the sword gleam through the murk of night,
Like lightning in the clouds.

Wakes slightly.

Where is thy sword? Ah, all is calm again!
I hear no noise; I feel thy breast on me
Heave like the sea turned warm in clinging foam.

Vesper sounded.

But all grows dark and clear. Soft, soft, I hear

The day rings out its knell again—
Oh, happy, happy, happy knell! 'Tis I—
Thy Tristan, come again—
Isolde, all is dark and Rual waits.
'Twas long—'twas long—long—long—

Faints.
Isolde embraces him passionately.
Enter king and Brangœna, led by Lionel.

ISOLDE

Speak once again: 'tis I am here;
Thine ever own Isolde. Speak, oh, speak.

TRISTAN

I never loved thee, Iseult.
Spurn, if thou wilt; I have dishonoured love
In thee and her. Another has my heart.
My vows were treacherous breath.
Isolde stabbed me with her barbèd scorn;
The wound is here—here—

ISOLDE

Tristan, awake; I hang upon thy lips.
Thou dreamest not; 'tis I, Isolde, speaks.
I gave up all for thy much richer love;
I've followed thee—oh, cast me not away
With wild and wandering words.

TRISTAN

Rising.

Isolde, is it thou!
Come let us fly, we're off, the time is friend.
It seems to grow forever darker; and no sun
Will burst his hateful face upon our joys.
Hast thou, enchantress, such a potent charm
To bring on chaos once again?

Our love shall be an Eros in the void.
Oh, it is dark, so wondrous, wondrous dark;
'Twill be eternal night again:
No day—and we shall never part.
Our love is like a death, eternal
As the doom—

Dies.

KING

Oh, God! Too soon for my forgiveness.
Sir Lionel, scour the road for Melot's trail;
His ship is riding in the harbour now.

Exit Lionel.
To Tristan and Isolde.

I loved ye both, and grieve for both again,
In that ye were unfortunate in your loves;
And I unwittingly did cause you woe.
Oh, God! with what coercive blinding fate
Didst thou oppress this bud of knightly honour
Expanding in our favouring light, to blast
And wither it like a common sprouting weed,
Gendered in the world's rank desert places.
And as for thee, thou mage, enchantress fair,
Some mystery did shield thy heart from me;
I barely knew thee, yet I loved thee too:
Thou seem'dst elemental as a sprite.

Lionel within. Sounds of a struggle.

LIONEL

Resist no longer, I have found thee out.
Thou pestilence in penitential garb!
Rual—Rual—one whom thou wouldst seek,
And give thy life to find.

Drags on Melot in monk's garb.

RUAL

Not seeing Melot.

'Tis all over;
What flickering life is left for me to live,
Will purchase naught.

Seeing him.

What! Melot!

LIONEL

I found him slinking toward the nearest coast,
Too eager in his pace for his profession;
And so I questioned him.

RUAL

Good king, let me
Be judge and executioner—

Draws sword and makes for Melot.

KING

Hold!

RUAL

Or when 'tis done, as 'twill be shortly done,
I care not then if thou be both for me.

To Melot.

Thou stain upon the scroll of chivalry,
Thou wrinkled sneer of malice, die,—thou leer
Of hateful guile, I'll blot thee out.
And then will earn my death by thine; for then
I shall deserve to die. Thy presence here
Alive unsanctifies the place: thou dead,
The uses of my further life are none;
For they were sworn to serve thy death alone.

KING

Hold, Rual! Art thou Melot in that guise?

MELOT

I am, my liege. Give me a sword to fight;
And I will cut this varlet's bursting breast,
And ease his throat.

RUAL

Here, take my sword;
'Twere butchery else, though thou deserv'st no more.
Yet Tristan would have scorned to kill thee thus
Unarmed.

Melot takes sword.

Good,—if thou slayest me,
'Twill seem as if I fell upon my own sword's point,
Not thine. I know no better place to die;
And if I die, I'll never need a sword.
But if thou diest, bury it as a cross;
'Twas worn by one that led a knightly life.

MELOT

Exceeding knightly, as we learned last night.

RUAL

Taking Tristan's sword.

My lord, thy sword will be dishonoured now;
But I will try to wield it well.

Some one offers him a shield, for Melot has visible armour beneath his gown.

Stand off! Make way!
I'll have no shield but my own valour now,
And Tristan's name. Oh, Tristan, be yet near;
Hover a moment ere thou fly to heaven;
And let thy vengeance speak through my right arm.
Flash with the gleam of lightning on my sword;
Strike lurid terror in this false black heart.

They fight, and Melot is killed.

RUAL

To Tristan's body.

This is my offering to thy memory;
And now my life is done.

To king.

My liege, thine utmost
Can add no chapter to the book complete.

Rual drops on his knee.

I sink for thy rebuke; I've disobeyed;
I've killed Lord Melot.

KING

Thou art the same old Rual.
Nay, do not kneel to me for pardon, sir;
But ask my generous thanks. Thou servedst well
Him whom I did my best to serve; who sat
Within the sacred'st precinct of my heart.
Sir Lionel, thou wast a faithful friend;
And always ruledst high in Tristan's love,
As Tristan ruled in mine. For this last service
To thy dying friend, and mine the most beloved,
Ask what thou wilt; thy utmost wish
Can never meet my willingness to thee.
Thou hadst the loyal heart to dare my ire,
Which would have been extreme; now take my love;
Thou'lt find it equal to thy daring, sir.

ISOLDE

Deliriously.

The night doth come; this was the latest day
That ever thou wilt stay from me again.
Thine absence kills me. Tristan, I am come.
The night droops on—thou liest in my arms
Yet warm with ebbing life—
I come—

Thine eyes shall light the way—
Thy song shall lead me through the pathless dark.
Oh, Tristan, melt not, flee not from my arms;
I come—

Dies.

KING

Isolde, one last word of full forgiveness.

BRANGÆNA

Dead—dead—my sweet, impetuous flower—
The mild spring sun of joy had wooed thy heart,
Like some too early blossom to unfold:
Then woe came like a dull, relentless frost,
And blasted all its petals ere they closed.

KING

Death, thou hast done the deed I came to do;
Joined them at last. I loved ye both so much,
I could have found a joy in yielding up
My queen to one to whom she had been given
By higher hand than mine could oversway;
Your happiness would solace all my loss.
Two infinite joys to them whom I most loved
Would cure my self-inflicted pain.
Oh, Rual, go thou not so quickly back,
To Bretigny again; stay for a while;
My castle be thy home. And, Lionel,
I'll lean on thee, as once I leaned on Tristan:
And so farewell; I go to hide my grief.

Enters castle.

Curtain.

Epilogue

Epilogue

OH, let me sing one song before I lie
Enfolded in my shroud.
Oh, let me sing one song before I die
And mingle with the crowd
Of other mortals, quaffing Lethean sleep;
And I shall be contented then to creep
Noiseless to death, yet proud.

Oh, let me sing one eager, throbbing song
With words the heart hath found;
I then, too, willingly will join the throng
Of dead ones under ground.
My song will be my soul and dwell
Immortal in man's heart, and swell
His pulses with its sound.

Oh, let me sing one song before all cold
I lay me on my bier,
One simple, beauteous song, before I fold
My dust in cerements drear:
Then willingly will I descend,
In peace with life, for at my end
I leave a deathless tear.

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